

Increase Our Faith!
Luke 17:1-10, 20-37
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Read Luke 17:1-10, 20-37

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

Hopefully you know the name Corrie Ten Boom, whose imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp is the subject of the book and movie, *The Hiding Place*. The title comes from the beginning of her story when she and her family were involved in hiding Jews. They were discovered, and she and her sister, Betsie, were sent to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp where they received horrible treatment. Betsie died there, but Corrie survived and went on to become a writer and a speaker, spreading her faith in the Lord through her story. After the war, she was speaking in Munich about how God forgives when we are truly repentant, and many people came to hear her speak. One man approached her after the talk. He said, "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?" And he thrust his hand forward.

Corrie said, "I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze... Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it – I knew that... I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids."

"And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently... And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried, 'with all my heart!' For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."¹

You and I may not have an intense story or scenario where we needed to summon up deep courage to forgive someone like that, but that does not mean that forgiving other people comes easy to us. It is costly, it is difficult. And sometimes we have to forgive someone multiple times. We'll be challenged in many ways today, with one of them being our attitude and ability to forgive. We'll also talk about faith, obedience, and readiness. We are going to get through an entire chapter of

¹ Dr. Frank M. Barker, Jr., *The Gospel of Luke, Vol. 2* (self-published), "Forgiving Others" sermon on Luke 17:1-10, pp. 7-8.

Luke today, something we have not done yet. Usually it takes 2 to 4 weeks to get through a single chapter. But we can accomplish this because verses 11-19 is the section that I preached on for my very first sermon at CenterPoint Church, way back when I was candidating in November 2019. I am skipping that text, you can find the sermon on the website, but we'll study the rest of the chapter. The first four verses are Jesus addressing sin from two different sides,

I. Temptation and Forgiveness (vv. 1-4)

¹ 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. 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."

The first two verses indicate that while it's not great for you or me to sin and do something that falls short of God's law, it's even worse for us to lead others into sin, tempting them or prodding them to sin. Don't make others stumble, don't cause little ones to sin. A lot of the commentaries said that Jesus' reference to "these little ones" being caused to sin in verse 2 is any Christian. But listen to the parallel passage in Matthew 18 (vv. 2, 5-6): *"And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them... Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."* That clarifies for us that "these little ones" is talking about children.

Children are particularly vulnerable. Any of us can be led astray and tempted to sin, but with age and maturity come strength and wisdom to avoid that. Children haven't necessarily developed those things and can be more easily deceived and brought into sin. I don't think it's any secret that even among criminals and prisoners, those who abuse children are looked down on and treated the worst. Even those who have no qualms or conscience about breaking other laws have an inward sense of how awful it is to take advantage of children. And Jesus implies that God will deal harshly with those who cause little ones to sin. Better for you to die a cruel death – a millstone was so heavy that it required several men to move it. We should be discipling our children in the faith and protecting them from those who would harm them, who would lead them away from God.

The second two verses deal with when a Christian has sinned against you. You have a responsibility to not only point it out to him so that he has an opportunity to apologize/repent, but also to forgive him when he does ask for it. Is there a limit to that forgiveness? By using the perfect number seven, Jesus was saying, "no matter how many times you are sinned against even by the same person, be ready to forgive every time." In Matthew 18:22, Jesus makes that number 70 times 7! The point is there should be no limit to our forgiveness! This is not to deny that people need to be held accountable and we don't enable people, but the emphasis here is on our actions, not theirs. Now, does someone have to give satisfactory repentance for us to forgive them? If we just had these verses, it seems very conditional: *"if he repents, forgive him."* But Mark 11:25 says, *"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"* and Ephesians 4:32 says, *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."* Those verses link your forgiving others to what Jesus has done for you and to your relationship with God the Father, regardless of whether the other person has repented or not.

There's two parts to what Jesus is calling us to: there's forgiveness, but also rebuking. Dale Davis comments that, "we are often too spineless to rebuke and too resentful to forgive. Jesus requires of

us both courage to rebuke and compassion to forgive. The Christian life, as usual, requires both guts and goodness.”² Now, confrontation should not be in anger; it should be designed to clearly communicate that there was hurt and offense, but that you are seeking repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. We need a mature, rational culture of speaking honestly to one another, and one that is heavily seasoned with the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation.

II. Faith and Obedience (vv. 5-10)

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. 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.’”

So the apostles had just heard they would need to forgive endlessly and what was their response? “We gonna need a lot more faith for that!” But Jesus said that a small amount of faith could do great things. But it has to be genuine faith in a great God. We don’t actually try to move a tree with our faith as though we have some kind of magic powers; this is just Jesus’ vivid picture of how God can use us and our tiny faith to do something impossible. Like continually forgiving others.

Jesus linked the discussion of faith with the idea that faith is expressed in obedience to our Master, God. Verses 7-10 sound like a harsh teaching: “Just do your duty and sit down and shut up, don’t expect to be thanked for it” is maybe how it comes across. But that is just Jesus using a common image that the disciples would understand – servants have tasks and they should carry them out. We might read this parable and say, “I don’t like thinking about God as a stern master,” but remember that this is only one picture or analogy of who God is. In the next chapter we’ll see a picture of God as a Judge. But He’s also represented as a Father, a landowner, and a King; lots of images of God. It’s important that we understand, though, that we are servants of a Master, and that we are to obey God without question and without thought to being thanked for our service. The Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 16 reminds us of some things about our good works: “These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith” (16.2) “but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment” (16.5). In other words, we do good works now that we’re Christians because our hearts are changed and yearn to please God, but we should never think that the good things we do win us any extra grace or are us doing God a favor.

Bobby Jones is one of the great names in golf history. He won thirteen major tournaments, so he was a winner, but he was also great sportsman. If you didn’t know, golf is a game where you call penalties on yourself. It’s not like most sports where you try to get away with things and if the ref or ump didn’t see it, then you did get away with it. No, the rules of golf expect your honesty. Bobby Jones called penalties on himself several times, even risking losing tournaments. When he was praised for it, he said this: “You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank.”³ We should

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke 14-24: On the Road to Jerusalem* (Glasgow: Christian Focus, 2021), p. 58.

³ Andrew Greig, *Preferred Lies: A Journey into the Heart of Scottish Golf* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2007), p. 89.

obey and please God and have that same attitude. Now the beautiful thing is that while Jesus' words here tell us not to expect to be treated as anything more than a servant who does his or her duty, that His words in a previous parable tell us otherwise. Back in 12:37, He said, "*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.*" We shouldn't expect praise and reward, but Jesus says that God will shower His grace on us.

We jump down to verse 20 and shift gears a bit as Jesus explains

III. The Kingdom and Christ's Return (vv. 20-37)

²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." ²² And he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them. ²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. ²⁵ But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— ³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. ³² Remember Lot's wife. ³³ Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left." ³⁷ And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

When the Pharisees asked when the kingdom of God would come, they probably had visions of the Lord delivering them from Roman rule and establishing the government as a theocracy, a return to the Old Testament Israel where God ruled the nation through His laws. Crush the Romans, punish the Gentiles, restore Israel to her rightful place of supremacy.⁴ But they were confused in their wishful thinking: the King was in the midst of them, so the kingdom was as well. They couldn't see it, but it was right there and they could have seen it if they had understood who Jesus was. But because they refused to recognize Jesus, they would be blind to the kingdom's presence.

Jesus then turned to His disciples to warn them of some things that were coming. Verse 25 explains the first things that would happen chronologically: the current generation would reject Him and make Him suffer, a clear prophecy of His upcoming arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In verses 22-24 He said, "When I'm gone and you are looking for my return, don't listen to a bunch of wild speculation; when I come back, you'll know it! The skies will light up from one end to the other." The Pharisees couldn't see the kingdom, but one day there will be no missing His return.

For those of you in your mid-20s or older, do you remember what were you doing on September 11, 2001? I was working at a Christian bookstore and was checking inventory and talking with my co-workers when my wife called to say that I really needed to come home because of some crazy stuff happening on the news. We were all just going about our week, we all went to work on a normal

⁴ Davis, p. 69.

Tuesday not realizing that disaster was about to happen. So it was in Noah's day right before God flooded the earth, so it was in Lot's day when God destroyed Sodom, and so it will be when Jesus comes back to earth in His second coming! Look at how similar the descriptions of Noah's and Lot's days are in verses 27-28: in both time settings, the people were just doing the normal things: eating, drinking, getting married, working, buying and selling. Notice that Jesus didn't say that they were doing bad things, getting drunk, stealing, committing adultery, etc; they were just preoccupied by life. In the midst of all of that came judgment. They thought life would go on forever just like it always had and then it stopped. Verse 30 – *“so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.”*

And then verses 31-33 remind us both that judgment will come so fast that you will not have time to flee or gather your things, but also to focus on what's important: Jesus coming back – and not on what's unimportant – our stuff. Don't be like Lot's wife, remember her? God was destroying Sodom and told Lot and his family to leave and not turn around to look back. She looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Don't look at your life, don't cling to your stuff, as though they are important; when Jesus comes back, embrace His return and be ready to go to heaven with Him! I feel like I've just been hammering this theme the last few weeks: this world and this life are not worth loving and clinging to when we have eternity stretched out before us.

We have to prioritize being ready for the next life. Verses 34-35 talk about a husband and wife in bed and one will be saved and the other won't; then two women working side-by-side and one is taken, the other is left. One has saving faith and the other does not. The wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the saved and the unsaved often stand side-by-side. A good reminder to share your faith with those who are closest to you, as well as a reminder that you won't be getting into heaven just because your best friend or your spouse is. You must have saving faith yourself.

Conclusion

In twelve days, the world will observe Good Friday. My daughter was talking to someone at school about spring break and she commented, “Oh, it starts on Good Friday.” And the girl said, “Yeah, what's that?” “The day that Jesus died on the cross and was buried.” “That doesn't sound very good, why is it called that?” So she told her. We don't call that day good because the world crucified the only perfect Person to ever live; the Son of God in the flesh who did nothing but love and heal the world. We call it Good Friday because through Jesus' death, God brought about His plan of salvation. Actually, calling it good is an understatement; we should call it Amazing Friday or Astounding Friday. But we call it good to remind us that God used what man meant for harm to be for our good.

As Jesus hung on the cross, one of the last things that He said was, *“Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34). Even after Jesus was betrayed by one of His closest friends, after He was arrested in secret by a group of Roman soldiers, after He was brought before two different governing bodies for a religious, then a civil trial; after He was beaten, whipped, stripped, mocked, and then nailed to a cross, where He would hang for hours as He slowly suffocated to death – even in the final stages of all that, He cried out to God the Father for forgiveness for those who had done this to Him. Jesus forgave the ones who killed Him, and that forgiveness can extend to you, and you can extend forgiveness to others. 2 Corinthians 5:19: *“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”* -> **Transition to Communion**

Benediction- Colossians 2:13-14 - *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”*