

We Are Unworthy Slaves

Luke 17:1-10 (05-03-2020)

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In Luke 16 Jesus aimed his teaching at the hearts of the money-loving Pharisees. Now He pivots to the disciples, as you can see in Luke 17:1. Jesus is going to teach His disciples the reverse of the typical behavior of the Pharisees. They were spiritual stumbling blocks for people trying to enter the kingdom. They were not forgivers. They lived with bitterness and malice in their hearts for other people. Yet the Pharisees were convinced they were meriting God's favor with their religious rituals and rules. Their proud praying and giving were done in public, blowing trumpets so everyone saw how holy and righteous they were. They certainly did not see themselves as God's slaves. No, God owed them for all their wonderful deeds; they were earning God's merit with every religious act, or so they thought.

Now Jesus is going to teach His disciples in three areas – stumbling blocks, forgiveness, and what it means to be God's slave. These are stiff and difficult requirements for His disciples. Of course, Jesus never said the Christian life would be easy. It can only be lived if you have the Spirit to strengthen you and supply the humility and glad submission required to follow His counsel given in these scriptures. Jay Adams says this is some of the most difficult teaching in the New Testament. Let's find out why.

A severe warning: don't even think about ever causing another believer to stumble in his faith.

Luke 17:1-2, He said to His disciples, "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.

The word stumbling blocks in the Greek is the word *skandalos*, or scandal. The word refers to the trigger-stick holding up a trap. You bump into it and the trap closes. I went muskrat trapping when I was a kid. We had a creek not too far away. We'd take our traps down there, look for trails in the water or along the bank edge, and bang in the stake attached to the trap. Then we'd open the jaws of the trap and carefully set the trigger. We gingerly placed the trap in the water or along the bank. Sometimes we scattered some chicken guts around the trap to lure the muskrat. Then we'd head home. About six in the morning we'd go to the creek to see what we caught. We did catch quite a few. That trigger on the muskrat trap was dangerous. And so are stumbling block triggers. The trigger that set the trap would be the scandal. Scandals could also be something you'd hide along a path to cause someone to trip and fall.

Jesus now gives a warning. He says stumbling blocks or traps are sure to come. In this evil world full of lies and false religion and evil operators, they are inevitable. Don't be naïve. There are people who will cause you to stumble. Be on your guard. Check everything you hear with God's Word. Paul, Peter, and Jude strongly warn us against false teachers and wolves in sheep's clothing.

Professing Christians can become stumbling blocks and trip you with their bad attitudes and criticisms. Their grumbling and whining and complaining can affect your thinking. Even you as a believer may offend another believer. Your attitude, your words, and your behavior can cause another one to stumble. One pastor told about a local business man who visited his church one Sunday. As he entered the church, he saw a man who had cheated him in a business deal. He immediately turned around and walked out. We can easily be stumbling blocks to others. Our worldly behavior, immodest dress, selfishness, arrogant attitudes, or bitterness against others leave an impact on those we are around. It can happen in the home when a dad with an anger problem unleashes his fury on a child without ever humbling himself, asking forgiveness, and changing. That child may think, "If that's what Christ does for people, I'm not interested."

Jesus isn't kidding about this: "Woe to that person who becomes a stumbling block to others." Then He adds a most shocking statement about the person who might be a stumbling block. Rather they would tie an upper millstone – the round stone used to grind grain, hard and heavy, maybe the weight of a concrete

block – to his neck and throw him into the sea before he causes any trouble for God’s people. That is a horrendous way to die. But it demonstrates that it is a horrendous way to live. Jesus uses that picture to show how seriously God takes the act of causing His little ones, His people, to stumble. His children are the apple of His eye. Make sure you treat them with love and goodness.

Look to yourself. Examine yourself. Are you doing anything that might lead a Christian astray? You don’t want your lack of love and obedience to Christ to be a trigger that ensnares another believer. Don’t cause another believer to stumble by your gossipy, critical tongue. Rather, let your speech to be always with grace, sprinkled with salt. An unforgiving spirit could be a stumbling block to others. Jesus goes on to explain.

Do all you can to quickly resolve any conflict between you and another believer.

Luke 17:3-4, "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."

“Be on your guard.” Pay attention. Again, Jesus is serious. If anything causes trouble in families and churches and in our own lives, it is unresolved conflict and especially bitterness. True forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to practice. Someone does something that hurts us deeply, and while we may say, “Oh, that’s ok,” we hold it in our hearts and allow a deep root of bitterness to grow. We mull it over and over, maybe for years, just not letting it go.

So what do you do when this happens? How do you resolve conflict between you and another believer? What if someone slanders and lies about you? Verse 3 says, “First, if your brother sins against you.” We can add here sister, husband, wife, cousin, fellow church member. This will happen. Someone will offend you. It may even be another believer. We are all sinners living with other sinners. The potential for offenses is great.

Around 9 AM you get a phone call from a faithful sister. “George told us last night he saw your car in front of a girlie lounge the other night. He said we need to pray for you.” Of course it wasn’t true; George lied and slandered your good reputation. What do you do? What does Jesus say? Go and talk with him. You don’t call an elder to go talk to George. You go. Early in my ministry we had a dear old gentleman who clipped his nails during the service. “Clip, clip, clip.” Loud enough for most people to hear. One of our sincere young men asked me to go talk to him about it because it was disturbing others. I was a young pastor and thought maybe that was my responsibility. So I went, and that was a mistake. This elderly gentleman’s wife never forgot how in her mind I shamed her husband. If someone offends you, you need to go to that person yourself. So go see George. But before you go over to George’s house, you must do this. You must pray and examine your own heart. You must make sure you don’t have any sinful logs sticking out of your eye. Matthew 7:5 says before talking to someone else about their sin, first take the log, your own sin, out of your own eye.

After you have taken care of your own sin problems, then you go talk to George. But you go with a loving, humble, gentle spirit, knowing how easy it is to sin yourself. You’ve been guilty many times. Galatians 6:1 says you are to restore others with a gentle spirit, looking to yourself. Have you seen that commercial of the two guys sitting in the one guy’s manhole with a weird colored carpet? “We’re friends, right?” “Sure, what’s up?” “This carpet.” Humbly, the friend replies, “Yeah I know.” Love and humility work together. So here you go as a brother in Christ. “George, we’re brothers in Christ, right? We both want God’s best for each other, right? I have a question for you. Did you tell your small group you saw my car in front of a girlie lounge the other night? First, I wasn’t there so what you said was a lie. And second, you slandered my name by telling that lie to all those people.” George looks down, obviously grieved, and says, “I did. I thought for sure it was your car. Please forgive me. I was wrong.” “Absolutely, George, I do forgive you.”

Now, what does it mean to forgive? Ephesians 4:32 tells us we are to forgive others in the same way God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us. God has forgiven us by promising us He will never use our sins

against us. Forgiveness is a promise; it isn't a feeling. It's a promise that says, "I dismiss the case. I won't hold it against you. I won't dwell on it myself and I won't go sharing it with anyone else. Case closed. Let's go get a coffee." Here's where it really gets hard. About an hour after forgiving George you get another phone call from someone saying George had just called and said he saw your wife coming out the Old Beer Joint on Monday night. "Really? Thanks for telling me."

Back to George you go to lovingly, humbly, and gently confront George about his lie and slander. George tears up a little, "I have the worse problem with lying and slandering others. I need to be more careful. I am so wrong. Please forgive me." And you again make that promise to George, "I forgive you, George. I won't use it against you, dwell on it, or share it with others." You say nothing about it being the second time in one morning. After you have a word of prayer together and assure George of your Christian love, off he goes about his business.

Later after lunch, yep, another call reporting that George recently saw your son's car in front of his girlfriend's apartment at two in the morning. "George, you need to repent of that." "So sorry, I was wrong. Please forgive me." "I forgive you George." And so it goes. You get four more calls throughout the day about George lying and slandering your daughter and your grandson, and others close to you. What do you do? Luke 17:4 says, "If he sins against you seven times in one day, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him." Case dismissed. George needs biblical counsel on how to stop his sinful habits and begin loving others and telling the truth. But for you, Jesus says, it is, "I forgive you, George."

Jesus is obviously using hyperbole here, just like He did in Matthew 18 when Peter asked, "How often should we forgive our brother, maybe seven times?" Jesus said, "Not seven, but seventy times seven." Jesus is teaching how important it is to learn to forgive among God's people. If you've been forgiven by God through Jesus, then you must be a forgiver. You dare not hold bitterness in your heart. Your first reaction may be to take revenge, to hurt them. That's malice. That's sin and will only destroy you. Christ doesn't give you the luxury to hold hatred in your heart.

You may be asking several questions, though. Shouldn't I insist on seeing George actually change before forgiving him? "I'll forgive you if you produce some fruit of repentance, say make it through a day without lying and slandering me." That's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, "If he repents, forgive." You can't read another person's heart. Jesus is teaching the importance of developing the habit of forgiveness.

What if George doesn't repent? Do you forgive him then? Jesus said, "If he repents." So if he doesn't repent, you can't extend forgiveness to him. However, like God, you must have a forgiving heart. Jesus said this in Mark 11:25.

"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions."

Note: anything against anyone. That's good. Like God, you must have a forgiving heart. You won't hold bitterness or a grudge or resentment against any one. You are ready to forgive as soon as George owns up to his sin. If he doesn't and continues to slander, you may need to ask one or two elders to go with you to confront George. It takes humility to rebuke your brother, and it takes humility to receive a rebuke and repent. Pray for humility.

You say, "This is hard stuff. I don't think I could forgive all that much." That's exactly what the disciples, here called apostles, were thinking. So they respond to Jesus:

Luke 17:5-6, The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you."

The disciples thought they needed more faith to obey what Christ is laying down. This is hard stuff. Jesus says, "No, it isn't more faith you need. You need to use the faith you have in obedience" Even a little faith,

like a mustard seed, can uproot a mulberry tree and have it planted in the sea, if that was God's will. No it isn't more faith you need, but more obedience in your faith to do God's will, which is to forgive those who offend you when they repent. Even seven times a day! Lesson: Be humble repenters and quick forgivers. God's people are forgivers.

Remember your status and identity as God's slave, not as God's hired hand or hourly worker.

Luke 17:7-10, "Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? 8 "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? 9 "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? 10 "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

We have to realize that we are God's slaves, not his hourly union workers or volunteers. He purchased us with the blood of His Son from the slave market of sin and now we belong to Him. We are not our own. When we obey Christ's commands, we are only doing our duty. We aren't serving Him to earn merits, like the Pharisees were with their self-righteousness, thinking God owes them anything.

So here Jesus describes the life of a slave. You are out in your Master's field working the soil. Then you make sure the sheep are fed. When you come in, your Master doesn't reward you for what was your duty to do. He commands you to wash up and prepare his meal. When you have fulfilled your duties for the day, as his slave, you may sit down and eat. Sound like your life, Mom?

A slave is someone under the authority of his Master. He doesn't work to earn any merit. He doesn't even work for thanks. He's a slave. I'm a slave of Christ. You're a slave of Christ. We don't deserve a star or trophy or prize for doing our duty. This puts a knife in the heart of all self-righteous, merit-based religion that makes God our debtor. God owes us nothing. We owe Him everything. We are not worthy of being praised or thanked or rewarded. We are unworthy slaves. If God wants to reward us, that's His prerogative. He doesn't owe us a reward. We are just thankful to Him for the privilege of serving Him.

Yes, this is difficult teaching. But God will strengthen us to obey Him, even with a little faith.

- Don't be a stumbling block to other believers. Remember that millstone!
- Be quick to forgive and resolve conflict. You don't have the luxury of holding a grudge.
- Remember your status as God's slave. You don't deserve God's reward. You've only done your duty. If God should reward you, that is His prerogative and you'll thank Him for it.