

A Disciple's Duty

October 27th, 2013

Luke 17:1-10

"And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ²It 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. ³Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

We've been talking in recent weeks between the relationship between the love and grace of God, and His commandments. Specifically, the fact that we are loved by God and saved from the penalty of our sins and brought into a relationship with Him through the grace given us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and no merit of our own, and yet that relationship is still a relationship that is characterized by submission and obedience to commands. On the surface that may seem contradictory, but it's not.

Our daughter has just learned how to ride a two-wheeler, and as she's beginning to do that there are certain rules we've laid down for that. You need to wear a helmet; you need to stick to this loop between our driveway and our neighbors'. And even as she gets older and she gets a little more freedom to go farther away, there will still be rules and barriers and requirements and commands.

And you realize, don't you, that it's not hatred or a desire to be oppressive and burdensome that we have requirements and rules about things like that? It's a deep, devoted, overwhelming, burning love for our little girl and her well-being that compels us to make "commands" of her. And likewise, Jesus does make commands of us. We are, as His disciples, servants of Jesus, and we have certain duties: 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.*' "

That word duty is a hard word for us, a "four-letter word" if ever there was one. "Duty" means there are some obligations that we have

regardless of how we feel and regardless of what our circumstances are and regardless of what the consequences are to us. They *will* get done. It's your duty. And Jesus, in these verses (which are all one unit, though in our Bibles they're broken up into three separate headings), is laying out for us what some of a disciple's duties are. This isn't everything, but it does get pretty deep down to the root of things. So let's look at, 1. What are the disciple's duties? And, 2. In what power does the disciple carry out those duties?

The Disciple's Duties

Verses 1-4 describe the disciple's duties, particularly in the context of our relationships within the New Covenant community that Jesus was forming, the Church. They're duties that pertain to how we are to maintain our relationships with other believers, which is a big part of what it means to be Jesus' disciple (cf. John 13:34-35, which is why I say that this gets pretty deep down to the root of things). We can boil the teaching in these verses down to two main duties.

1. Be careful not to give offense to others

"And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ²It 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. ³Pay attention to yourselves!"

Especially in America, and even more especially in Suburban America, people love their privacy. The right to privacy and the protection of our privacy is very critical to us. We don't want people to see us, to get too close to us. We love our anonymity. And Jesus says that being His disciple changes that. Jesus says here that your life is going to be visible to others, and it *does* matter what people see.

If you claim to follow Jesus, you are an example. People are going to notice, and if you, a professing Christian, are sometimes harsh or sometimes unapproachable or sometimes you gossip or sometimes you

make promises you don't keep, or you're critical and condescending, you never admit when you're wrong, etc. it's going to cause people to stumble. People are going to see it, and they might well say, "If that's what Christianity is all about, then why would I bother with Christianity?" Your life can actually be a stumbling block, whether to believers or unbelievers.

Praise God, Jesus tells us here that it's going to be hard. He warns us that temptation will come. And we know there's grace and mercy when we do fail. In fact, I believe that's a big part of our witness to others. But the point is that *everything* – even how you handle things when you blow it – is a witness to the worth of Jesus in your lives. It's either adorning, confirming, authenticating, demonstrating, the power and truthfulness of the gospel, or it's not. You are always pointing people to Jesus, or to self. And woe to the person who consistently lives their lives pointing to themselves (v.2). This is serious!

2.Be careful not to harbor an offense from another

"³Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins (so be prepared for that, He wants us to have realistic expectations about our life together. Sometimes there will be sin, and hurt), rebuke him (not talk about him behind his back, but actually go to him and make him aware of the wrong he's done, and when you're paying attention to yourself, you'll do this humbly, Galatians 6:1), and if he repents (take ownership for the sin, confess it as that, and turn from it, leading to a change of behavior), forgive him (literally, let it go. Because you can either let it go, or grow embittered, and that's toxic to the soul), ⁴and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him (so, persevere at this.)"

In other words, relate to others in the community of Christ the way God has dealt with you in Jesus. This model for relationships so vividly depicts what God has done in Christ: He takes our sin seriously, by

pouring out His holy judgment and wrath against our sin on His beloved Son (and so we take sin seriously by rebuking and repenting), but He shows mercy and compassion and love and forgiveness, by punishing Jesus, not us (through our union with Him, so it is in fact just), and so we love and forgive others who have sinned against us, even as we have been loved and forgiven for our sin against Him.

Life in the Body of Christ is meant to be a reflection of the gospel, and it's the context in which we are increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus by becoming people who love. As I've often said, it's as if we're a bunch of little rocks that God has put into a bag, and He's shaking us up so that we collide with each other. Sometimes sparks fly, as our sin gets exposed, but through the ministry of the gospel in those times, God is gradually making you into a beautiful, smooth gemstone. Conflict will come, and Jesus says our duty is to deal with it, not flee from it, and by reflecting Jesus in that way, we even bear witness to the unbelieving world that we are disciples of Jesus, changed by His grace.

The Power to Carry out our Duties

Now, if that's Jesus' vision for the church: sin, rebuke, repentance, forgiveness, and persevering at it, then we can easily make one simple conclusion: life in the church is going to be hard! And I think that's the sentiment expressed by the disciples in response to Jesus' teaching: "⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" In other words, "This is impossible! Maybe superstar disciples, people of extraordinary spiritual power and strength, can handle something like this, but certainly not us! HELP!!"

And Jesus lovingly disagrees with them. No, this is not rock-star, super-spiritual Christianity. This is the basic sort of stuff that faith in Jesus supplies: "⁶And 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." I appreciate that He

acknowledges that these kinds of relationships – being sinned against us, rebuking, repenting, forgiving, and persevering in it – is miraculous.

But those kinds of miracles are what faith does. And so we see the power in which Jesus means for us to fulfill our duties: faith. Not just faith in faith, of course, but faith *in Jesus* (as we'll see clearly in a moment). Jesus says if you have faith the size of a mustard seed (meaning, even just the smallest bit), you can experience the miracle of Christlike, Christ-exalting, gospel-reflecting relationships. He's saying, "If you have even the slightest understanding and spiritual grasp of who I am and what I have done for you, even a smidgeon of faith that you are a sinner saved by grace, you'll be able to forgive."

Unworthy Servants

How so? Verses 7-10 give the explanation (remember, though the words of Scripture are inspired by God, the headings are not, and this one has the potential to obscure the connection between these words. Jesus is elaborating on how faith even the size of a mustard seed will lead to our relating to one another the way He calls us to):

"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.' "

Jesus assumes that this parable will drive home His point to the disciples, but it might not have that immediate effect on us, because we are so far removed from the culture of Jesus' day, that we don't understand what servanthood looked like in that day. These were not slaves the way we tend to think of slaves in American history. A servant was somebody who had fallen into debt. Back in those days,

they didn't have such a thing as bankruptcy, where if you declare bankruptcy, the government declares the debts gone.

So if you fell into debt and you developed debts far greater than what you could pay, you were obligated to go into service to your creditor until the debt was paid off, which means the creditor owned your *labor* but not your *person*. A creditor couldn't just do anything he wanted to you. But he did own your labor.

So a servant comes in, and the reason the servant is in servitude is because the servant is a debtor. The servant owes. The servant has no illusions that the creditor owes the servant all kinds of thanks. The servant knows full-well that the creditor, the Master, owes him nothing. So in verses 7-9 Jesus puts His listeners (including us) in the position of the master, but then in verse 10 He turns the tables and puts us in the shoes of the servant. And so Jesus is saying, "Don't you know, disciples, that this is the situation you're in?" This is a depiction of the condition between man and God.

When you refuse to forgive, when you refuse to love a brother who has sinned against you, you're forgetting, you're not believing, who God is, and what you have done to Him by your sin, and how He paid the debt you owe by punishing your sin in the flesh of His Son, and who you are now because of His love and grace. The only way you can harbor a grudge and feel anger and hatred in your heart towards a person is if you say (maybe even subconsciously), "*I'd* never do that sort of thing!"

But the gospel says, "Yes, you would! You *are* that bad, in and of yourself, and if in any way you have come to differ, it's because of the grace of God, not your morality or effort or willpower." That's the most basic, elementary tenet of our faith! That's why Jesus says you just need faith the size of a mustard seed to carry out these obligations to love. I don't want to minimize the difficulty. It is, according to Jesus, a miracle. But God is a miracle-working God!

All you're doing when you refuse to forgive others is you're putting on lenses that have you somehow outside of the free forgiveness and mercy of Christ, thinking that you deserve forgiveness because of some sort of merit that you've accomplished rather than Christ and Christ alone. You're acting like a master, not an unworthy servant.

But if you have come to see with eyes of faith that your eternal Master, the One who made you and owns you and holds you together, was willing to come down from heaven and take the form a servant, so that you could be forgiven of your treasonous rebellion, and made not only a servant, but a co-heir in His Kingdom, can you imagine what kind of love and healing and forgiveness would flow in our relationships?

You'll never take yourself out of the judge's seat and learn to forgive unless you really believe in what the true Judge of the universe did for you in stepping down from the judge's bench and being condemned with the judgment that you deserved. How can you now stand in judgment of anyone else?

Living in Love Today

So, church, can we experience this? Can we live this together? Sin, rebuke, repent, forgive. Where do you see yourself there today? *Don't worry about that person.* Where are you? The temple of God, the place where His glory dwells, is no longer a building. It's a people. And we, as a local church, knit together by His grace in the New Covenant, are a covenant community, and that means we learn how to pay attention to ourselves, and when we stumble into sin, we rebuke, and repent, and forgive, and do it over again.

That's our duty, as disciples of Jesus. " ⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

This is our duty, but it’s a grace-driven duty. Look at the One who came down from heaven to forgive your sin-debt, and bend out to others the love and grace that have come to you in Christ. Because Jesus paid it all, all to Him we owe. We can’t pay Him back, and He doesn’t intend us to try to. But when we’re dwelling in this love, when we have tasted this grace, as unworthy servants of the King who became a servant, we know we owe to one another the love with which we have been loved.