

No Offense

Luke Series #43

Luke 17:1-10

David Sunday

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We say in our vision and values statement, “We believe and value the eager cultivation of relationships that are marked by humility, honesty and joyful servanthood.” These relationships reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ—the functional centrality of the gospel, which is our core value.

Therefore, we want to pursue these kinds of relationships in the church and in our life together. You might wonder, “Is it really possible for people who are simultaneously saints and sinners to really live together with honesty, humility and joyful servanthood?” I believe that Jesus is showing us the way in this passage.

Take a minute to think at the context in Luke’s Gospel. Since chapter 14, Jesus has proclaimed God’s love for lost, broken sinners—the people whom He came to seek and save. Luke has been speaking of a God Who gathers the outcast and His lost sons into His family.

In chapter 16, we saw the great divide between the religious leaders who love the riches of this world and the humble poor who trust in God’s mercy. Here we come to chapter 17, a long, extended passage where Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem and teaching His disciples what it looks like to follow Him. Jesus is saying, “God is a God Who gathers lost sinners into His family.”

In chapter 17, Jesus is going to give us practical, pointed instruction on how we need to live together in this family and how we can become a community where saved sinners can grow up and become strong in the grace of the gospel.

So the main claim of this sermon is that, by God’s grace, our church—Christ’s Church—can become a safe place where relationships are marked by honesty, humility and joyful servanthood. I am encouraged by what God is doing in our midst to cultivate that kind of atmosphere and environment. We haven’t arrived yet, but by the grace of God we’re moving in that direction and need to continue working on it. So as we open God’s Word, may God’s Spirit teach us about pursuing these kinds of relationships.

Let’s read the Holy Word of God, beginning at verse one of Luke 17.

And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 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. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 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 apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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.

"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'? 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'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 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.'"

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be pleasing in the sight of God, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I read an article about this passage by Pastor Clint Archer. He called the article "Living with Grizzlies." Grizzly means "golden-haired." Grisly means "causing horror." It's an interesting double meaning. A grizzly bear causes horror if you get close to him. It can weigh 300-790 lbs. It can move faster than your average cyclist can. You can't outrun a grizzly if he's on your trail.

The best hope if you encounter a grizzly bear is to lie down, play dead and hope it's not hungry. You don't want to get close to grizzlies, unless you're a guy named Timothy Treadwell. For years, Mr. Treadwell lived in Alaska and spent about 35,000 hours with grizzly bears. He would stroke their fur like a family pet and became very comfortable with them. The grizzlies weren't afraid of him and he wasn't afraid of them.

The park officials said he was misguided at best and dangerous at worst, setting an example that would cause great harm. In 2003, at the end of his thirteenth visit, the park officials were proven right, when suddenly, with no apparent reason, a bear killed Treadwell and his girlfriend in the park.

Why is "Living with Grizzlies" an appropriate title for an article about Luke 17? What was Pastor Clint Archer thinking? Well, he may have been thinking about the sad fact that this has been the experience of Christians living with other Christians in churches. They thought they were in a safe place. They got comfortable with the people and let their guard down. Suddenly, out of the blue (so it seemed), they were attacked, mauled and painfully wounded by other believers. They sadly discovered that the Church of Jesus Christ can, at times, be grisly. It can be a place where there is horror in relationships.

The truth is that other believers can be dangerous. In fact, it gets more personal than that. You and I can be dangerous to other believers. We can damage one another if we're not careful. Can sinners live together with other saved sinners and learn to trust one another? Can we really pursue the kinds of relationships we say we value as a church? As a pastor, that's a passion of mine.

One thing that grieves me is when believers cannot trust other believers. We put our guard up; we're suspicious, defensive and distant from one another. We won't open our lives to one another because we're afraid of being hurt.

I've lived long enough and experienced enough to understand how we can feel that way sometimes. I get it. But I won't settle for it either. I believe there is great hope for the Church of Jesus Christ. I believe that God wants to make His Church a place that is safe; where you can be honest about who you are; where you can humble yourself in the presence of other believers; and where you're eagerly, joyfully pursuing relationships with one another that are marked by servanthood. That is what I believe God wants and is building His Church to be.

How can we cultivate that kind of community? We need to cultivate a place where grace reigns, where love prevails and where trust is established. It's vital that we pursue this.

Here in this passage we have four imperatives that each of us must embrace. There's a personal responsibility to each of us as individuals if we want to live together like this as a church and if we want to have a healthy, trusting, grace-filled community.

Watch Yourself, that You Cause No Offense

The first imperative is found in verses one and two: watch yourself, that you cause no offense to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Verse one: *"He said to his disciples, 'Temptations to sin are sure to come...'"*

Stumbling blocks are inevitable. The word for "temptations to sin" is the same word used for a stick with bait on it to trap an animal. The Greek word is *scandalon*: "that which causes scandal." Jesus is saying that even within the safe walls of Christ's Church, temptations to sin will come. It's inevitable. He doesn't want us to have the wool pulled over our eyes and be naïve. Does He want us to be trusting? Yes. Naïve? No.

It begins with our own hearts guarding ourselves. There will be enticements to draw you away from a sincere, pure devotion to Jesus Christ because there is still, within each one of us, a grisly nature. J.C. Ryle, the first Anglican bishop of Liverpool, said, "The best of men are men at best." There will be, even within the walls of the church, people who sneak in who will be false teachers and wolves who dress like sheep. There will be servants of unrighteousness who make their way into Christ's church from time to time.

But Jesus says, "Though this will happen, watch yourself so that you're not a cause of it." Do you see the word "woe" in verse one? Oh, the danger! Oh, the peril! The New Living Translation says, *"What sorrow awaits the one who does the tempting!"* Woe to the one through whom temptations to sin come. How dreadful, Jesus is saying, to be in the position of causing one of Christ's disciples to fall into

sin and turn away from the faith, taking one of these little ones—the new believers and children of God who are vulnerable.

When you think about it, that includes all of us. What did Jesus say in Luke 12:32? “*Fear not, little flock.*” He called us His little flock, so all of us are vulnerable. Jesus says, “Oh, that you would be careful to not cause one of My vulnerable sheep to fall into sin.”

How does this happen? How do Christ’s sheep turn away from a simple, sincere faith in Jesus? It can happen through false teaching and through inconsistent behavior.

You can personalize this by thinking about your own words. Do your words entice others to join in gossip? Do your words cause others to become discontent because you complain? Or think about your behavior. Maybe you’re unmarried and in a dating relationship with someone of the opposite sex. Does your behavior entice this person into sexual sin? Think about the way you speak of yourself and about what God has done through you. Do your words and attitudes convey a boasting that tempts others to envy or covet or to be jealous?

“Be careful,” Jesus says. “Watch yourself, that you’re not a cause of temptation.” Now, Jesus is not excusing the person who sins, but He’s saying, “Look at yourself first and ask yourself this question: ‘Are my life and my words making it easier or harder for the other people in my life to wholeheartedly follow Jesus?’”

Someone is watching me; someone is watching you. Someone is looking at your example and the effect of your life should make it easier for him or her to follow hard after Jesus and go all out for Him. When people come into our gatherings, they’re watching us as a church. Do they see a group of people who are eagerly pursuing relationships marked by honestly, humility and joyful servanthood? Or do they see something else and say, “I know what they say they believe, but I look at how they act and speak to one another and it makes me really question the authenticity of that which they believe”?

You see, the world is looking more at how we live than at what we say we believe. They’re looking at our love. When they see the love of believers for one another, then they may be compelled to examine the gospel.

How serious is this that I take care and cause no offense? Look at verse two: “*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 [one of my vulnerable disciples] to sin.*”

J.C. Ryle also said, “Anything would be better than doing harm to souls.”

“An awful death,” Jesus said, “would be better.” Think of all the ways you would prefer to die if you had your choice, and I doubt this would be on any of our lists: a millstone around the neck, dragging you to the bottom of the sea. Jesus is pretty severe and in-your-face with this illustration. He wants us to take care.

When I read the Psalms, I often come to this passage in Psalm 69:6 and I know the context is a little different from the way I apply it to myself. The Psalmist says, *“Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, oh Lord God of hosts. Let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, oh God of Israel.”*

When I read that passage I pray, “Lord, do not let my life become a cause of stumbling to the people of Your church. Don’t let my life lead them astray.” There have been many times when I’ve prayed, “Lord, if the trajectory of my life is going in a direction that is going to lead Your people away from You, please take my life before letting me do something that would cause them to stumble.”

Kent Hughes of College Church in Wheaton sometimes prayed in their staff meetings, “Lord, if any one of us pastors is about to commit adultery, please take his life first. Please take us, rather than let us become a stumbling block to Your people.” It’s serious.

Now, can this sin be forgiven? If we lead other people into sin, will God forgive us? That’s what John Donne asked in his hymn, A Hymn to God the Father:

Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sins their door?

Will God forgive that kind of sinning? Yes! Praise God! If we repent, He will forgive that sin.

But Jesus is saying, “Far better for the stumbling block never to have occurred. It’d be better to die first before causing someone else to fall away from Jesus, so take care. Watch yourself, to cause no offense.”

That’s step one to “relationships marked by honesty, humility and joyful servanthood.” That’s step one to the church being a safe place where believers can grow up into maturity in Christ.

Watch Yourself, that You Take No Offense

But then we come to step two in verses three and four: watch yourself, that you take no offense, or that you harbor no offense. Be careful not to be an offender in verses one and two, but, in verses three and four, be careful not to be easily offended. Why? Because it spoils the spirit of the new Kingdom.

I suppose each of us have walked into an atmosphere from time to time—maybe a home or a group of people—where you get the sense that these people have a problem with one another. They’re offended with one another; there’s a coldness in the atmosphere. When we are easily offended, it poisons the atmosphere and chokes the cultivation of the relationships that we want to pursue together.

How do you make sure that you take no offense? Jesus says in verse three, *“Pay attention to yourselves!”* How do you pay attention to yourself? Here’s what you need to do: if your brother sins, rebuke him. Well, that’s fun, isn’t it? I hope you don’t enjoy doing that. I hope you don’t feel like you have the special spiritual gift of rebuke, thinking God put you in this church to rebuke and be in everyone’s

face. I hope that's not something you enjoy but, on the other hand, I hope it's not something that you will absolutely refuse to do.

Rebuke is vital to the cultivation of honesty in a relationship. If you see a brother or sister going astray, or, if they do something to you that's hurtful, don't go off in your corner and become sullen. Don't go to someone else and tell them about it. And definitely don't make a mental note and think, "All right, I'm going to make sure they are always on one side of the church and I'm on the other. I'll just make sure our paths never cross."

If your brother or sister sins—this is very practical—rebuke him! Go to him and tell him about it. How? Philip Ryken's advice is the following:

- Go courageously, not timidly—willing to say what needs to be said no matter the cost.
- Go gently, not judgmentally—demonstrating the tender mercy of Christ.
- Go humbly, not proudly — having already confessed your own great sin.
- Go affectionately, not harshly—showing how much you love your brother or sister in Christ.
- Go prayerfully, not impulsively—asking God to glorify Himself through your ministry of reconciliation.
- Go alone. Show him his fault.

If we are going to grow in our life together and have relationships that are marked by honesty, humility and joyful servanthood, this has to be one melody line in our repertoire. This has to be part of our ministry to one another. We need to go to one another. Why? Because this kind of mutual ministry is part of the good news of how God shepherds His flock. It's part of His care for His people.

I would much rather have people in my life who are willing to tell me when I'm doing something hurtful, annoying, wrong or difficult for them, than I would to go through life never having someone love me enough to tell me what I've done that's bothering them.

You can ask my wife or our pastoral staff to confirm this is something I apply to my own life. This past week, I asked the pastors, "Is there anything I'm doing that's frustrating? Annoying? Anything I can do to make ministry together more joyful?" I don't want to be blind to my own faults and failures. I don't want people to feel as if they need to walk on eggshells around me, either, saying, "Oh, I wish I could say something to him but I don't know." I'd rather welcome it and say, "Please, tell me. How can I help you?"

Jesus says this needs to be part of our life together because it shows we're a family. It shows that we have others' best interests at heart. I know your leaders at this church want to be accessible to you. We want this ministry to begin with us. If we do something that you are struggling with or if we do something that may offend you or cause confusion, we would hope you know us well enough and love us

tenderly enough to come to us and tell us—to rebuke us if necessary. We want to start with the leadership in our church.

Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary has a statement in his commentary that I think is helpful. He says, “The assumption in all this is that disciples have a certain quality in their relationships that allows this type of positive, honest, loving confronting behavior to occur [and this last phrase is what I like] without destroying their relationships.” Look at that!

So how do we “till the soil,” so to speak? How do we get to know one another well enough that we cultivate these qualities in our relationships so this type of honest, loving, confronting behavior can occur without destroying relationships? How can we do this in 21st century America?

We’re going to have to be intentional about it. We cannot drift into it. Let me say very lovingly and warmly—I hope you know my compassion and tenderness in saying this—if you only come to church on Sunday mornings you will most likely not know these relationships. It will very likely stunt your growth and maturity in Christ. You have to invest and put yourself in a position where you are saying, “I’m pursuing healthy relationships.”

The way we do this in our church is through Care Groups. These aren’t just ancillary or optional to the life of our church. We believe this vehicle is vital for the cultivation of these kinds of relationships. I would strongly, lovingly urge you to be invested in a Care Group. You will be able to cultivate relationships when you open your heart and learn to trust one another, helping each other grow up into maturity in Christ.

You might say, “I don’t like that. It seems like we’re being watchdogs over other people’s lives. I don’t want to be part of a legalistic, fault-finding atmosphere, where we’re always looking for what’s wrong with each other and pointing it out.” Well, I don’t want that either and neither does Jesus.

Look what Jesus says next in verse three: *“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him...”* Forgive him! Jesus is full of grace when He says this. If a rebuke has been heeded and repentance has been expressed, forgiveness is to be immediately offered. Be ready and eager to forgive... and forgive...and forgive...and forgive. How many times? Seven times in a day (Luke 17:4). Seven is the number of perfection. There’s to be no limit to our willingness to forgive a repentant brother or sister in Christ.

I know there are many complicated situations. What if someone doesn’t repent? What if their sin is against someone else and not against you? Jesus isn’t dealing with that right now. He’s saying, “Watch yourself, that you’re not harboring any grudges. Watch yourself, that you’re ready to forgive.”

We should be like a good doctor. A good doctor doesn’t care how many times a patient comes to him with a sickness. That doctor is ready to administer care and work toward healing as often as the patient needs it, as often as the patient becomes ill.

As God in Christ has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. How many times has God forgiven you? What limits does God place on His forgiveness? This is radical, isn't it? We need God to do a work in us because we can't accomplish this ourselves. That's why, I believe, the disciples request in verses five and six—this is one of their most brilliant ever—“Lord, increase our faith!”

Fuel Your Faith in Jesus

That brings us to the third imperative in verses five and six: fuel your faith. Verse five says, “*The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’*” This is in the context of relational challenges and teaching about repentance and rebuke and forgiveness.

Sometimes the greatest disillusionment of believers stems from broken and strained relationships with other believers. We're tempted to give up. At times, we're tempted to think, “It is just impossible to have these kinds of close relationships. We can't trust one another. We can't really know one another.”

At times, we think it's undesirable. We think, “I'd rather stay at a distance than dive into relationships because I don't want to get hurt.” And we will get hurt if we really seek to live together in Christ's church. We will be confronted by situations where we feel it is impossible or undesirable to forgive and bitterness can take deep root in our hearts.

That's why this is a brilliant request. Faith has the power to overcome deep-seated resistance to the cultivation of these kinds of relationships. In order to cultivate the kinds of relationships we value, we must look at God to be for us and provide for us what we do not have and what we cannot be in ourselves.

Jesus says to the disciples in verse six, “The problem is that you don't have enough faith.” He says, “*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.*”

Jesus is saying that which seems relationally impossible becomes gloriously real when we simply look to Jesus. It doesn't matter how great your faith is; it matters what the focus of your faith is. When we look to Jesus and fix our gaze on Him, things that seemed relationally impossible—deep-seated problems and relationships—can be uprooted. A mulberry tree had such a vast root system it was thought it could survive for 600 years. Jesus is saying, “You might look at your relationships and see deep-rooted difficulties, but, if you look to Me, I'm able to do wondrous things in those relationships.”

Fuel your faith in Jesus. When you're struggling to live together with other believers in a way that actively pursues honest, humble, joyful service, look at Who He is and gaze on Him.

Look at Jesus & Forsake an Attitude of Entitlement

That brings us to the fourth and last imperative in verses seven through ten: Look at Jesus and forsake an attitude of entitlement.

What causes stumbling blocks? What causes bitterness and division to rise up in the community of faith? Often it's an attitude of entitlement that says, "I deserve better than this." It's an attitude that looks at how other people are treating me rather than how I am serving them.

In this parable at the end of His teaching, Jesus reminds us who we are as His people. We are servants; we're slaves. We're bound to our Master and, lest we flatter ourselves at what wonderful servants we've been, Jesus reminds us that our Master has not yielded a huge profit margin from our service.

Look at what He says in that last sentence. We are unworthy, unprofitable servants. That's all we are! Even if we have done everything we are supposed to do (and who has?), we only would've done our duty.

What master, after his servant has come in from plowing the field, says, "Here, sit down and have a drink. I'll fix a meal for you"? Jesus says, "Even if you've done everything you're supposed to do—and no one has—you've only done your duty." When you're careful to watch your life and doctrine closely so as to not cause anyone else to stumble, don't pat yourself on the back at how good of a Christian you've been. You've only done your duty.

When you fight against your fleshly desires and resist temptation due to guarding your own heart, don't say, "I'm really mature in the faith." No, Jesus says, "You've just done your duty." When you faithfully rebuke, lovingly confront, graciously forgive, joyfully serve and pursue honest and humble relationships—when you give and give and give and forgive even seven times a day with kindness and compassion—Jesus says, "What have you done? You've done your duty. That's what you were supposed to do!"

What if you always obeyed God perfectly, never doing anything wrong? What have you done? You've only done your duty. Duty is not a bad word; it is a good thing.

This past August, four football players at William Patterson University in New Jersey went shopping for batteries and a cable for the stereo system in their dorm. They went to the store and found what they were looking for, but there wasn't anyone else there—no employees or cashier. They called out and assumed that whoever was working was in the backroom because the lights were on and the door to the store was open. They were in a hurry to get somewhere, so they counted everything they had purchased, added it all up (including the tax) and left the cash on the counter.

The store was really closed and there was a malfunction in the lock, causing the lights to stay on and the door open. The security cameras recorded these guys going into the store, getting this stuff and leaving. When the management came in the next day, they saw what had happened. The media caught wind of it and it became a story of great renown. They called these guys in and gave them \$50 gift cards,

congratulating and rewarding them for being honest. The Today Show had them on and celebrated the honesty of these men. They were only doing their duty. That's what they were supposed to do.

When you're in a grocery store and they charge you more than you were supposed to pay or you are given too much change, when you notice it and give it back, they say, "Wow! Thank you!" Thank you for what? You're only doing your duty. That's what you're supposed to do.

The instructions Jesus gives in this passage about our life together are just basic discipleship duties. These kinds of relationships aren't optional. This is what Jesus expects from His people.

Doing your duty does not earn you a special status in the community of faith. Just because you serve well does not give you a right to demand more or to claim any kind of entitlement. God is not our debtor. He doesn't owe us.

So Jesus is saying, "If you really want to live together the way I want you to live, you have to forsake an attitude of entitlement." But as we look at this passage and realize Who is saying it and where He is heading—to a cross to lay down His life for His people—it should cause us to think a little bit. What kind of Master actually rewards His servants for doing their basic duties? What kind of Master would say to His servants, "Here, you sit down. Let me prepare a feast for you. Let Me serve you"?

Only one Master does that and in this passage He's on His way to a cross to lay down His life for unworthy, unprofitable servants. And He's going to serve us to the end. When we finally appear with Him in glory in the new creation, He is going to take the robes of a servant and say, "Sit down and let Me prepare the marriage supper of the Lamb for you." Christ will gird Himself and serve us.

That's the key to pursuing these kinds of relationships in this church. It's remembering Who our Master is. We have a Master like none other, a Master Who actually rewards unprofitable servants. He looks at a cup of cold water given in His name and says, "That will not be forgotten. That will be rewarded."

In light of that kind of Master—Who He is and what He is teaching us—what should our response be?

- Treat each member of His community of faith with the utmost care.
- Be careful not to give offense.
- Be careful not to take offense.
- Don't think of yourself as entitled to anything special.

How do you live like that? You fuel your faith in Jesus. You look at Him. What a wonderful, generous, gracious Master He is!

When you look at Him, you'll find these verses from John Newton to be true:

Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,
Since we have seen His beauty
Are joined apart no more.

To see the Law by Christ fulfilled,
To hear His pardoning voice,
Transforms a slave into a child,
And duty into choice.

Let's stand together and pray.

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