

The Attitude of an Unworthy Servant

Luke 17:1-10

Key Verse: 17:10

“So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Since 15:1, Jesus has been teaching his disciples and sincere seekers and his critics. To review Jesus’ teaching briefly: there is joy in heaven when one lost sinner repents; use worldly wealth in ways to be welcomed into eternal dwellings; serve God, not money; our eternal destiny of heaven or hell is determined by how we respond to God’s word in the Bible. As Jesus continues teaching his disciples, we will learn about sinful influence, rebuking, forgiving and having the right attitude of a servant of God.

First, beware of sinful influence. Look at verse 1. Jesus said to his disciples: **“Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.”** Technology and science has made many advancements in the world. But these have not eradicated sin. Sin is still alive and well in the world. The daily news speaks of rampant sin: war, crime, adultery, divorce, cheating, lying, stealing, fighting. **Three reasons why things that cause people to sin are bound to come are as follows:** we live in a fallen world; everyone is a sinner; and, there is a devil who tempts people. Jesus knew that sin would not be erased entirely in this present world. Yet he added: **“but woe to that person through whom they come.”** Bad things are ahead for any person who influences others to sin. Every person is an influence to others for good or for bad. Paul said we can use our bodies as either instruments of wickedness or instruments of righteousness. For example, if one influences others to use drugs or to be sexually immoral, that is a bad influence. There are several ways one can cause others to sin. False teachings and deception lead people in to sin. Persecutions cause people to live in fear. Some people seduce others into a wicked, ungodly activity. The consequence of being a sinful influence to others is serious and tragic. Look at verse 2. **“It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.”** Going for a swim on a hot day is nice and refreshing. But dying a violent death by drowning in the sea is terrifying. Jesus said that such a terrible fate would be much better than causing a little one to sin. Here “little one” refers to a young Christian. Jesus said a severe judgment awaits unrepentant and insensitive sinners. Jesus said, **“So watch yourselves.”**

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Jesus was telling this to his disciples. Jesus is telling his followers to watch ourselves. Christians must be careful about the influence of our words and actions upon young believers. We must be careful of our teachings and our lifestyle. This is especially true of church leaders and mature Christians. Careless and critical words can cause others to sin. For example, it is a sin to condemn fellow believers, whether in our own church or in another church. Lord, have mercy on us. It is not our duty to pass judgment. That's God's job. Christians also must be careful how we live, not to live in laziness, immorality or hypocrisy. Young believers learn from mature believers, just as children learn from their parents. So parents and mature believers in Christ have a great responsibility to watch themselves--their words and their actions. Then how can we watch ourselves? One way to watch ourselves is to fear God. In Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, **“God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”** Another way to watch ourselves is to hold on to the word of God. Psalm 119:11 reads, **“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”** Prayer is another strategy to watch ourselves. Jesus taught us to pray, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Mt 6:13) Christianity has often given Jesus a bad name. Our words and actions must give Jesus a good name. But what happens when we fail? Jesus tells us what we must do.

Second, rebuke in love. Jesus continued in verse 3b, **“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”** When we see or hear about someone's sin, it can make us angry and impair our relationship with that person. It does not solve the problem if we quietly nurse a grudge or if we complain to someone else in feelings of self-pity. Jesus said, **“If your brother sins, rebuke him...”** This does not mean that we have a license to be the Rebuke Police, pointing out others' sins. That's what the Pharisees did, and they didn't help people to repent. The intention of rebuking the person is to maintain spiritual family fellowship. We are to **“speak the truth in love.”** (Eph 4:15) Jesus said more fully in Matthew 18:15, **“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”** The aim is to win our brother over. It is also possible, that we have misunderstood or misinterpreted words or actions. The point is to have a right relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, for we are God's family. Listen to Paul's words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1-2: **“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”** Again, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:2, **“Preach the Word; be**

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prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction.” And again, Paul wrote in Galatians 6:1, **“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”** When we see or hear of a Christian brother or sister’s sin, we should not ignore it and hope it goes away. Jesus commanded us to rebuke the person, in order to restore this person in love.

Third, forgive him. Jesus said that if the offensive brother repents, we are to extend forgiveness and restoration: **“if he repents, forgive him.”** But it's not always as easy as it sounds. Look at verse 4. **“If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”** Huh?! Have you ever been sinned against 7 times by the same person on the same day?! Perhaps by a sibling or spouse or best friend, since they spend a lot of time together. Jesus’ point is not to keep count of how many times we've forgiven them, but to be merciful and to keep extending forgiveness. Someone might ask, “But isn’t that insincere repentance if he just goes and sins again against me?”” Maybe. However, Jesus did not say, “If his repentance is sincere and he promises never ever to do it again, then forgive him.” Jesus simply said, “If he repents, forgive him...If he comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” Wow! According to Jesus, the words, “I repent,” are very powerful and acceptable to God. Let’s all say, “I repent.” Let’s all say, “O God, I repent of all my sins!” That felt good. And it wasn’t that hard. Now let's try something harder. Turn to a person you know and say, “I repent of all my sins against you. Please forgive me.” Was it sincere? It doesn’t matter. You did your part. What is the proper reply? [“I forgive you.” Look at the person and let’s say it all together.]

Why must we forgive like this? It is because we are incorrigible sinners who repeatedly sin against God and yet he keeps on forgiving us in the fountain of his grace. We need the forgiveness of sins daily to survive spiritually. Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Luke 11:4, **“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”** After teaching this prayer Jesus said, **“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”** (Mt 6:14-15) In Jesus Christ we can have and we can proclaim the forgiveness of sins. Peter proclaimed in Acts 10:43, **“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”** The Risen Jesus promised his disciples in Luke 24:47, **“...and**

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repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

The hostile Jews and the ignorant Romans committed a great sin when they crucified Jesus. It seemed like an unforgivable sin of rejecting the Son of God. But Jesus did not hold this sin against them. Jesus said from the cross, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** (23:34) Jesus prayed for their forgiveness. Do you think God accepted his prayer? I think so.

Why is it so hard to forgive others? It is hard when we hold on to our pride and self-righteousness and forget God’s grace to us. Matthew tells the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:21-35). A man’s million dollar debt was canceled. It was amazing grace! But then he went out and choked a man who owed him about \$20. He refused to cancel the small debt. The great debtor should have been merciful to his debtor just as he had received mercy.

Christians have been forgiven of their sins through the blood of Jesus Christ. As we are forgiven, we are obligated to forgive others who sin against us. Colossians 3:13 says, **“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”** Again Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32, **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”**

Fourth, “we are unworthy servants.” The apostles listened quietly to Jesus’ teaching until he mentioned forgiving a brother 7 times in one day. Then they interjected. Look at verse 5. **“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’”** Perhaps the apostles of Jesus felt they needed more faith to forgive again and again as Jesus commanded. I can imagine that one of the disciples, perhaps Bartholomew despaired at Jesus’ words, remembering all the times he should’ve rebuked Peter in love, but only secretly felt great for bearing with Peter’s weaknesses. It’s just my guess. How did Jesus reply to their cry for more faith? In verse 6, Jesus replied, **“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”**

What does transplanting mulberry trees have to do with faith and forgiveness? I have a thought on it. Any tree is hard to move, because of its deep roots. It might take a powerful tornado or hurricane to move a tree. When Jeff Cummings lost his job in Florida, he felt like he was hit by a hurricane. His life

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looked all messed up. But he put his faith in God and God brought order into his hurricane mess. Sometimes forgiving others seems harder than transplanting a tree. Sometimes a grudge or ill feeling feels deeply lodged in our mind or heart. Of course, Jesus doesn't want us to throw trees into Lake Michigan. Jesus wants us to forgive others. Jesus wants us to obey his teaching without calculation and experience God's power of deliverance and help.

To close almost three chapters of teaching, Jesus told a short parable in verses 7-10:

“Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

After working hard, we like to be rewarded, recognized and thanked, even if we receive a paycheck. So companies have Employee of the Month awards, bonuses and promotions; sports teams have banquet award dinners; and schools have recognition ceremonies. We like “thank you”s, handshakes and pats on the back, even if we only do our job. For example, preachers like to hear, “Thanks for the message, Pastor,” even though it's part of his job description to prepare the message to serve the congregation.

Jesus has given us many commands in the Bible: commands to love God, to love our neighbor, to love one another, to forgive, to give, to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him; to seek first God's kingdom; to have faith in God; to feed his sheep, to go into all the world and preach the good news, to make disciples of all nations, and many more commands. Sometimes when we obey one of his commands, we feel pretty good and we are tempted to relax and take it easy. Or we are hoping to get some kind of immediate praise or reward or blessing. There is a problem with expecting some kind of reward or praise or blessing. We become unthankful and proud. Then we get grumpy and self-righteous and lose our joy and eager zeal to serve our Lord. We start drawing lines and setting limits on our service. Jesus said this is not the right way of thinking. This is not the right attitude of a servant of God. Rather, **“So you also, when you have done**

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everything you were told to do, should say, **‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’**”

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? Anyone? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Ro 11:35-36) King David, right after bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem, had the attitude of an unworthy servant of God. He had in mind to build a temple for God. But God rather promised to build an eternal dynasty for David. When David learned this, he sat before the LORD and said, **“Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?”** In his prayer, many times David prayed, **“O Sovereign Lord,”** and many times he called himself **“your servant.”**

We can never repay God’s grace. We should not set limits on humility and service to God and others. St. Paul is a champion of one who served God with the attitude of an unworthy servant. He said, **“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle...But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”** (1Cor 15:9-10) Luke also recognized Paul’s humble service to God in Acts of the Apostles. Paul said in Acts 20:24, **“However I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”**

Sometimes we work hard for God to be recognized by people. Sometimes we compare ourselves with others and feel superior. This is contrary to Jesus’ teaching. Rather, an unworthy servant tries to please God. It is natural to want recognition. We have to make a choice: am I going to seek recognition from men or from God. Am I seeking to please God or men? Paul said that if he were trying to please men he would not be a servant of Christ. An unworthy servant seeks God’s recognition. He wants to hear God say, **“Well done, good and faithful servant!”** He never wants to hear, **“You wicked, lazy servant.”** Simply speaking, we must not be proud or lazy, but humble and thankful and work hard for the Lord’s honor and recognition.

These days many people in UBF are working hard for the summer Bible conference. We might be tempted to seek some praise or recognition or tempted to complain that we have to work so hard. Through this passage I see that I need to repent of all my sins, especially sins that give others a bad influence. I need to

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forgive others without exception and without limit. I need to be humble and thankful continually for God's grace. We Christians have been forgiven by grace and blood of Jesus Christ. We Christians have been chosen by God to be his children and his servants. We do not deserve his grace and calling. We must not forget his grace and calling in Jesus Christ our Lord. May God help all of us to have the right attitude to say, **"I am an unworthy servant. Even to serve God is my undeserved privilege."** Let's pray to have the humble attitude of Christ. Let's pray to live in the grace of Jesus and to say in any situation, **"We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty."**