

# “WE ARE UNWORTHY SERVANTS”

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.’”**

From the time Jesus set out for Jerusalem to die on the cross in order to fulfill God’s salvation purpose, opposition from the religious leaders increased steadily. Whenever they attacked Jesus, he answered with truth and grace in a way that would lead them to repentance. At the same time, Jesus protected his disciples from their bad influence. Jesus’ audience alternates between his disciples and the Pharisees. Yet Jesus’ focus is on the disciples. Jesus’ remaining time on earth with them was short, and there was a sense of urgency in his teaching. Jesus didn’t want them to remain as permanent sheep, but to grow as leaders in his ministry.

What kind of leaders should Jesus’ disciples be? He did not want them to be like the Pharisees: skillful, well-educated and eloquent, but corrupted. They loved money and human honor more than God. They ignored the marginalized and abused their privileges for their own benefit. Quite the contrary, Jesus wanted his disciples to grow to be like him. They should not be domineering, condescending, unforgiving or self-righteous and proud. Instead, they must be mindful, understanding, forgiving, humble and serving. In a very significant sense, we are all leaders. It may be in our families, in our schools, or in our workplaces. It may be for many people, a small group, or even one person. No matter the size, being a leader in God’s sight is vitally important. As a leader, building up godly character is crucial. It is far more important than knowledge, skills or gifting. Today let’s learn how we can build up godly character and grow as spiritual leaders.

**First, be mindful of little ones (1-3a).** Jesus said to his disciples, “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come” (1). The original Greek word for “things that cause people to stumble” is “*skandalon*.” It means a trap or a stumbling block or a snare. It implies being tempted and caught by the devil. We are all vulnerable to temptation as long as we live in these mortal bodies. But we should not yield to temptation, be caught by the devil, and lead others to sin. Jesus holds

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anyone accountable who causes others to sin. Jesus warned, by means of hyperbole, that it is especially serious to cause a **“little one”** to sin. Jesus said, **“It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble”** (2). A millstone was used in grinding grain and weighed hundreds of pounds. Needless to say, one with such a stone around his neck would go to the bottom of the sea and drown. This was an ancient pronouncement of a death sentence. Chilling as this is, it is a better fate than what awaits those who cause one of Jesus’ little ones to stumble.

Here, “little ones” refers to those who are helpless, vulnerable and marginalized. It may include the poor and crippled, as well as women and little children (14:13). In addition, it means those whose faith is weak (Ro 14:1). Regardless of their physical age, they need special care. They are very sensitive toward small things, such as what kind of food they eat, what clothes they wear, or which holiday they celebrate. They are especially vulnerable to critical words, or even being ignored. They easily fall into doubt or fear and become unstable. They need to be understood, protected and nurtured so they can grow strong, strong enough to overcome temptations, challenges and hardships. Jesus is very serious about protecting them. The disciples should learn how to shepherd such people. Otherwise, they are in big trouble with Jesus.

Jesus himself was so mindful of the weak that he **did not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick** (Mt 12:20). A bruised reed is so weak that it will break under the slightest pressure. A smoldering wick will go out completely if the smallest whist of wind blows against it. Jesus was so gentle and tender with all kinds of weak people that they could be healed instead of crushed. Matthew was deeply wounded by his sins of selfishness and outcast from society. But Jesus was such a humble shepherd for him that Matthew found rest for his soul, was healed completely, and became a light in the world. Apostle Paul learned of Jesus and was changed from a legalistic, harsh, demanding, violent man into a gentle, mild, loving shepherd. He said to the Thessalonians, **“Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well”** (1Th 2:7b-8). While Paul was in prison, he served Onesimus, a runaway slave, with the love of Christ, to the point that Onesimus became his spiritual son. So on sending

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Onesimus back to his master, Paul appealed on the basis of love: **“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you....”** Paul wanted the master to welcome Onesimus as a dear brother (Phm 9-16). Later, Onesimus became a great shepherd in the early church. Paul was so mindful of little ones that he was careful to put no stumbling block in their way. So he said, **“...if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall”** (1Co 8:13).

Jesus concluded his warning by saying, **“Watch yourselves.”** This means that leaders need to be very careful about their inner attitudes, what they say, what they do, and how they behave. When leaders are judgmental or critical in their hearts, **“little ones”** sense this immediately and are wounded, even if no words are spoken. In order to serve **“little ones”** leaders need to constantly come to Jesus and have his mindset. St. Paul said, **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness”** (Php 2:3-7). Before the Lord, I cannot but repent. Because I received all kinds of challenging shepherd training from a young age, I have a certain standard of what it means to serve the Lord. This led me to have expectations of others. At times, I have treated little ones harshly and without understanding. For this, I ask the Lord’s mercy. Let’s all learn the mind of Christ and serve little ones with his humility and love.

**Second, forgive unconditionally (3b-6).** Being mindful of little ones does not mean to condone sin. Jesus wanted his disciples to confront sin, saying, **“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent forgive them”** (3). Here the words **“sins against you”** refer to sins that affect us personally. It may be an offensive word, a mean e-mail or text message, or gossiping behind our back. It may also refer to rude behavior, or even a violent or offensive action. These sins cause harm and break relationships between believers. Furthermore, when we sin against others, ultimately we sin against God (Ps 51:4). Sin should be dealt with seriously and wisely. How, then, should we deal with the sin problem? Jesus said, **“rebuke them.”** The word **“rebuke”** means to express strong disapproval. It

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is clearly pointing out sin without compromise, yet not with judgmental condemnation. It should be done in a spirit of love. It should be based on the truth, not just one’s own opinion or emotion. The purpose of the rebuke is to help others repent before God, be forgiven, and restore their relationship with God and with us. This is a delicate matter. Paul said, **“...if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted”** (Gal 6:1).

When a person repents in response to rebuke, what should we do? Jesus said, **“...if they repent, forgive them”** (3b). What does it mean to forgive? It is to remove the guilt that results from wrongdoing. Actually, this is what God has done for us through Jesus. Jesus wants us to practice his forgiving love toward one another. Forgiveness restores relationships. Someone said, “Okay, I will forgive, but I will never forget.” This is not forgiveness. When God forgives our sins, he remembers them no more (Heb 8:12). Godly love keeps no record of wrongs (1Co 13:5b). Forgiveness brings the full and complete restoration of a relationship; there is no grudge or hint of judgment. Forgiving like this may not be easy. How many times should we forgive? Jesus said, **“Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them”** (4). So if someone sins against us at 8:00 a.m. and then says, “I repent,” we must forgive them. If the same thing happens at 10:00 a.m., we must forgive them again. If the same thing happens at noon, 2:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. we must forgive them every time. Wow! Forgiving is a full time job plus overtime. This may seem to be an unbearable demand. But it is actually just a reflection of what God does for each of us every day. Remembering what God has done for us enables us to practice this kind of forgiveness.

Why should we practice this radical forgiveness toward fellow believers? It is for the good of others, as well as for our own good. It is the way to form a loving community based on the truth. When we forgive someone, that person will be happy and may be changed by the experience of God’s grace. Moreover, when we forgive, we experience the heart of God and taste deep peace, freedom and joy. On the other hand, unforgiveness is a deadly spiritual poison. It ruins one’s soul; it leads to mental anguish and health problems. What is worse, it makes one a slave of the devil. It also causes great damage to the Christian community. When newcomers enter a church and sense unforgiveness, grudges and bitterness, they are discouraged

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and do not come back again. But if they experience forgiving love, understanding, and compassion, they recognize God’s presence and find what they are really looking for. I believe we all want to practice this radical forgiveness. But with our own strength it is impossible. We need strength from above.

This is what the apostles realized also. So they said to the Lord, **“Increase our faith”** (5). The apostles thought they needed huge faith to practice forgiveness. If their faith was the size of a ping pong ball, they felt it should grow to the size of a basketball. But 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”** (6). Jesus taught that the size of their faith did not matter; what mattered is that they had genuine faith, even as small as a mustard seed. Then what is genuine faith? It is total dependence on God and his power alone. Such faith has great power because it is in God who is almighty. It is not demanding God to do something. It is believing that God can do anything according to his will. It is not a license for us to get whatever we want from God. It is the assurance that he has the power to do what he wills to do. Faith is to acknowledge God as God and to trust him. When we ask God’s mercy with faith, God gives us the strength to forgive others. For example, when Joseph in Genesis was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, it was impossible for him to forgive them with his own strength. But when he walked with God, God gave him strength to forgive his brothers for their terrible sins against him. So he could embrace them and provide for them and shepherd them until they became the patriarchs of the nation Israel. After his father Jacob had died, his brothers came to him in great fear, not believing Joseph’s forgiving love. If Joseph had any unforgiveness in his heart, he could have taken advantage of them at this moment. But what did he do? He assured and comforted them, saying, **“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children”** (Gen 50:20-21). When we have faith in God, we can have the strength to forgive others.

Another aid in forgiving others unconditionally is to remember what God has done for us. The parable of the unmerciful servant tells us who we were and how God has had mercy on us. Our own debt of sin was so great that it was impossible to repay. Because of this debt we were crushed,

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depressed and anxious. We had a sense of condemnation no matter how hard we worked; we felt we would never be free. But when we asked God’s mercy, he cancelled all our debt out of his great compassion. When we remember this, we can be thankful, gracious and forgive unconditionally. We can form a loving community of mutual forgiveness and acceptance. May God help us all to forgive our brothers and sisters unconditionally.

**Third, have the humble mindset of a servant (7-10).** Jesus really wanted his disciples to grow as spiritual giants who could influence the whole world. One of the great hindrances to spiritual growth is self-righteousness or pride. We are especially vulnerable to this after successfully practicing his teachings. It may be after a blessed conference or event, or after attaining a measure of maturity. It may be after many years of sacrificial service to the Lord. In order to help his disciples, Jesus told the parable of the unworthy servant. There was a servant who plowed and looked after the sheep all day long. He really worked hard. He was very faithful, loyal, wise and successful. As a result, his master’s farm prospered. Yet he would never expect his master to say, **“Come along now and sit down to eat,”** but rather, **“Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink”** (8). He would not expect thanks from his master or a bonus. He would simply say, **“I am an unworthy servant, I have only done my duty.”**

In telling this story, Jesus is not defending social injustice. He is teaching his disciples what kind of attitude they should have after doing everything they were told to do. At such a time, it is tempting to seek people’s recognition and to expect to be served by others. It is so easy to see our own small contribution to God’s work and become proud and self-righteous. We know that God has done the work, but we want to share the credit to some degree. Then, if we are not recognized, we feel a sense of loss, become sorrowful and discouraged or even resentful. This makes us useless and we stop growing. How can we overcome this tendency? Jesus wants us to learn the attitude of the unworthy servant. Actually, this servant was very useful. But he did not think of himself highly; rather, he always saw himself in relation to his master. He knew who his master was, who he was and kept his identity as his master’s servant. This is the way of overcoming self-righteousness and pride. John the Baptist is a good example. When his ministry was very successful, people wondered if he might possibly be the

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Messiah. But he confessed, **“I am not the Messiah.”** When people asked if he was Elijah, he said, **“I am not.”** **“The prophet?”** **“No.”** Then he quoted from Isaiah and said, **“I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’”** (Jn 1:20-23). When people began to go to Jesus instead of coming to him, he was full of joy and said, **“He must become greater; I must become less”** (Jn 3:29-30). Paul also is a good example. He remembered always who he was and how Jesus had mercy on him. He said, **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”** (1Ti 1:15). Though he pioneered so many churches, he was not proud, nor did he become complacent. He was always humble and thankful, worked hard to the end, and gave glory to Jesus: **“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”** (Php 3:13b-14).

Be mindful of little ones, forgive unconditionally and have a humble servant’s mindset. This is the attitude of an unworthy servant. Let us cultivate this attitude so that we may grow as useful servants before God.