

UNWORTHY SERVANTS

Luke 17:1–10

Key Verse: 17:10

“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.’”

What’s more important to you, your *actions* or your *motives*? Couples argue about this. Sometimes, actions seem more important than motives. What if we *wanted* to rescue a person, but never did? That’s a problem. Other times, motives seem more important. What if we rescued a person, but didn’t *want* to? That’s also a problem. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been training his disciples in various ways. In today’s passage he turns to their inner lives, their motives. He first teaches them to pay attention to their own sin. At the same time, he tells them to rebuke and forgive each other. As a climax, he tells them the parable of unworthy servants. What’s the unworthy servant’s motive? How can we have such a motive? And why should we? May God speak to us through his living words today.

Jesus begins with a warning. Read verse 1a. “And he said to his disciples, ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come...’” In Greek, “temptations to sin” is just one word, and it’s repeated in verse 2, where it’s translated “cause...to sin.” This Greek word in both places is “skandalon.” It’s the same root as our English word “scandalous,” meaning “shameful.” But the point of the Greek word isn’t really that. In the New Testament, “skandalon” is translated as “stumbling block,” “obstacle” or “hindrance” (Matt.16:23; Rom.11:9; 14:13; 16:17; 1Cor.1:23; 1 John 2:10; Rev.2:14). Back in Luke 7:23 Jesus uses this word where it’s translated “offended” (cf. Gal.5:11), meaning to fall away from trusting him. But “skandalon” has a specific meaning. It refers to the moveable stick or trigger of a trap, where the bait is placed. When the tasty morsel is taken, the trap snaps on the creature taking it. So, “skandalon” means being enticed to do the things that bring us to ruin.

In verse 1 Jesus says such things “are sure to come.” What does he mean? He’s referring to this world, full of sin. This world is full of unbelief and rebellion against God. It’s full of a reckless attitude toward the word of God, and all kinds of relativism. It’s full of the influence of the devil. Living in this fallen world, it’s sure that many things will try to draw us away from Jesus. There are so many enticing things, so many traps. It’s so easy to stumble in our daily spiritual walk. It’s so easy to get offended and fall away from

trusting Jesus. It's why many Christians withdraw, hide, and barricade themselves from the world with a siege mentality.

Jesus goes on. Read verse 1b. "...but woe to the one through whom they come!" He's talking not about a general sinful influence but about a *person*. So he says, "the one." Obstacles, stumbling blocks, hindrances come in the form of *people*. Enticements or traps come in the form of *people*. He says "woe to the one through whom they come!" This woe is so severe, he says, "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea..." (2a). In other words, it's better to die quickly. To be clear, we shouldn't hate people, no matter how sinful they are. Jesus wants us to love the sinner but hate the sin. He's telling us here to develop in our inner lives a godly hatred toward sin.

Why? He explains it's because a person full of sin causes "one of these little ones to sin" (2b). To Jesus, tempting "little ones" deserves the worst punishment. But he's not just talking about children. "Little ones" can also mean any new believer or disciple. Like "little ones," young Christians are more easily enticed; they more easily stumble; they more easily get offended and turn away. Like "little ones," it's easy to overlook, forget or disregard them. In our inner lives, we need to keep learning from our Lord Jesus to truly care for the "little ones."

And who's causing the problems? Read verse 3a. "Pay attention to yourselves!" Wow! It might be his own disciples!? *They're* the problem? *We're* the problem?!? How's that? When we start taking our own sin lightly, we unwittingly entice others and cause them to stumble. When we're sinful, yet act like we're following Jesus, we offend people and make them so upset, they fall away from following Jesus. "Pay attention" means to be examining and monitoring ourselves closely. With this very same word Apostle Paul warns the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28a; cf. Lk21:34). Why do we have to watch ourselves so carefully? It's not because we're self-obsessed; it's to keep from becoming a bad influence to the "little ones." Basically, Jesus is telling us to repent of our own sins first. Even the great King David prayed to God, "Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" (Ps.19:13a) We all have sinful attitudes within us that we're not even aware of. They're toxic. Instead of being quick to evaluate others, we need to check ourselves first.

But the word "yourselves" might also mean "each other." Read verse 3b. "If your brother sins, rebuke him..." In Christian community we can't be like Cain, who said, "...am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen.4:9b) We're all called to take spiritual responsibility for each other. It sounds uncomfortable to always be pointing out each others' sins. It may even seem judgmental. But this rebuking isn't critical; it's not to drive someone out of the

fellowship; it's to help the person be restored to God and to fellow believers. This rebuking is not done out of pride, anger, or with superficial information; it's done out of love. On the other hand, not telling people the truth means we don't really care about them. Our Lord Jesus says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent" (Rev.3:19). In light of his words, when we see some sin in a brother or sister, may God grow in us a love courageous enough to rebuke.

The last part of verse 3 says, "...and if he repents, forgive him." This might be even harder. So in verse 4 Jesus repeats and expands it. Many say, "Without repentance, how can I forgive? That's condoning!" But even after people repent, we hold on to the wrongs they did. We hold it over their heads and treat them like they'll never measure up. One of the areas we need to pay attention to in our hearts is whether we're holding onto prejudices, grudges or unforgiveness. If we do, we can actually cause a struggling person to stumble and fall away. To truly "forgive" means to embrace and restore that person to the closest fellowship.

Jesus doesn't stop there. Read verse 4. "...and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." What's going on here? How can somebody keep committing sins against us and keep saying "I repent"? It may seem insincere. But Jesus is telling us to expect that a little one will have a great struggle, kind of like a toddler learning to walk. Though we may be sinned against, all day long, we need to maintain a forgiving heart, all day long, and truly embrace the person if he or she repents. Jesus puts it strongly: "...you must forgive him." Once, as a young Christian I said to my Bible teacher, "But the person has to *repent* first, right?" I thought I was being so clear with sin. But I was told, "No. God forgave us first, even before we repented." I got mad, thinking, "That's not what Jesus said. He said, '*If* he repents.'" Then I was reminded of how Jesus, while being crucified on a cross, in great suffering, prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34a). He wants us to have a forgiving heart first; he wants us to pray for others' forgiveness first. Then, when they repent, he wants us to share that forgiveness.

After Jesus teaches this, what happens? Read verse 5. "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" It's kind of funny. We can relate to them. To forgive as Jesus says, we really do need faith, faith to rely only on God. And it's so interesting: Luke suddenly calls the disciples "apostles," and he calls Jesus "the Lord." "Apostles" means "sent ones." Jesus the Lord is going to send these men into the world full of sin, to bring people the good news of his forgiveness. It may seem easy, but it really takes faith. When confronted with the sin of others, and on top of that, the sin within ourselves, we feel utterly powerless.

How does Jesus answer? Read verse 6. “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.’” A mulberry tree has such an extensive root system, it’s basically impossible to uproot it. Was Jesus telling them to go out and attempt absurdly impossible things? No. He was explaining the power of faith. It can seem impossible to forgive certain people or certain sins. But with even the tiniest seed of faith, Jesus says we receive the power to do it. It’s about not the *amount* of faith but the *quality* of faith. Real faith is faith in God. With faith in the living God, we can move mountains of unforgiveness, both within and around us. To practice such faith, our Lord Jesus taught us, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). While praying, we need to let God show us the people who hurt us and help us forgive them. Jesus wants our inner lives to be motivated by faith that forgives.

He concludes with a parable. Look at verses 7–8. “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’?” In that society, a servant was a servant, not a friend. A servant always had so much work to do. Plowing and keeping sheep all day long, and then at home, cooking a meal, getting dressed properly and serving the master while he eats and drinks. Only after all that, when it’s pretty late, can the servant himself eat and drink. He’s not self-centered but master-centered.

And if that isn’t hard enough, Jesus adds one more thing. Look at verse 9. “Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?” After all that hard work, all that serving, not even a word of thanks? Nope. What is Jesus teaching his disciples? Is he telling them to be hard on new people and train them not to be spoiled? No. In a surprise twist, he’s telling them how to view *themselves*.

Read verse 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.’” “*Unworthy servants*”? How could such hardworking, diligent, unselfish people be “unworthy”? The Greek word is even harsher; it’s literally “worthless.” Does Jesus want us to be feeling useless all the time? Of course not. Where does this unworthiness come from? It comes from knowing the grace of God.

When we know the grace of God, we take sin seriously. When we know the grace of God, we pay attention to our own spiritual condition first. When we know the grace of God, we come out of our selfishness and pride and hold each other accountable. When

we know the grace of God, we're willing to forgive over and over again. When we know the grace of God, even if we work really hard, we don't become self-righteous. When we know the grace of God, we know who we really are before God, that we're nothing but unworthy servants. Apostle Paul wrote, "For I am the least of all the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1Cor.15:9–10).

How can we know this grace of God? It's by coming to the cross of Jesus. Jesus is God the Son, the Author of life, the Sovereign Lord of all, the holy and righteous One. And me, I'm nothing but a sinful creature, swollen with pride, vanity, rebellion and the ugliest ingratitude. Yet he humbled himself to go to the cross and suffer what I deserve. He shed his blood to forgive, cleanse and redeem me from my sins. He gave his life so that I might live. Though I was his enemy he loved me that much. Only at his cross can I taste his grace. Only at his cross can my pride be rooted out, my hardened heart melted, and my inner life changed to be full of thanks. Only at his cross can I be renewed to serve him as an unworthy servant.

But why does Jesus want us to be like an unworthy servant? Ultimately, it's so that through us God may be glorified. Apostle Peter wrote, "...whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1Pet.4:11b). When we're trying to gain recognition and honor through our service, we're so sensitive, and we so easily get angry. But when we have the spirit of an unworthy servant, we want nothing more than for God to be glorified. That's what makes us happy, and that's when our service becomes a blessing.

Read verse 10 again. "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 God help us come to the cross of Jesus and renew God's grace in our souls. By his grace may we take sin seriously. By his grace may we rebuke and forgive. By his grace may we live and work as unworthy servants, for his glory alone.