“Unworthy Servants,” Luke 17:1-10 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 4, 2024)

And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! **2**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. **3**Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, **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.”

**5**The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” **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.

**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.’ ”

PRAY

We continue in our study of the gospel of Luke and today we come to a passage, the main point of which is forgiveness. Twice, once in verse three and another time in verse four, we read that Jesus mentions forgiveness, but all ten verses serve that theme.

It seems to me that forgiveness is one of those things that Christians know we should practice, it’s important, and we can even define it to some degree, yet its essence often eludes us. And you can see this wildly divergent ways people talk about forgiveness.

Years ago, I met with a couple who was struggling in their marriage. They had gone through hard times. Before they came to me, they’d seen the pastor who did their wedding to ask him for counseling about their problems. He said, “Well, it’s so simple. You just have to forgive each other.” That was all he said, and the way he kind of flippantly said it made it sound like it should be easy. Now for this couple, after years of going through the cycles of anger and withdrawal and harsh comments and lovelessness, forgiving one another seemed anything but easy.

And there are other voices in our culture who say that forgiveness can be a bad thing, and that the powerful use it to oppress the weak and shame the victims into silence. A few years ago, I read an article by Liane Carlson in *Harper Magazine.* Ms. Carlson is a feminist scholar and writes about the frustration she feels when she sees politicians or ministers (almost always men) who have been caught in some kind of scandal come forward and give the obligatory apology, usually with their wives faithfully standing right beside them. She wrote, “Apologies shouldn’t be the story when [men with responsibilities behave badly], but the apologies [keep] coming. They’re a slight of hand, the one neat trick to defuse social tensions without having to change anything about society … forgiveness is a custom propped up by two thousand years of Christianity and a host of people making money from it. There’s an industry of preachers, teachers, psychologists, and self-help gurus who create a set of cultural assumptions about who forgives and why … one that places enormous pressure on victims to make the hurt disappear.” Another scholar and pastor wrote expecting victims of crime to forgive their perpetrators is “dehumanizing and violent.”

Lots of talk about forgiveness today. What does Jesus say about it? Three things, and then we invite all followers of Jesus to take the Lord’s Supper: *first, Jesus says it’s important to forgive.* *Second, we’ll see there’s a process to forgiveness.* *Finally, we’ll look at the desire to forgive.*

First, it’s important to forgive. “And he said to his disciples, ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! **2**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.’” Luke 17:1-2.

There are two big questions presented by these verses scholars and pastors have wrestled with. They are, “What does Jesus mean in verse one by the ‘temptations to sin [that] are sure to come’?” and “Who are ‘these little ones” referring to in verse two?”

Some have said that the temptations to sin could be anything, any questionable behavior at all, and that the “little ones” refer to children. As a rule that’s a good thing, trying to behave yourselves around children, but some Christians by using verse one that way have turned themselves into obnoxious hall monitors. For example, I’ve heard it argued that verse one means Christians should not dress up for Halloween, because it could encourage children to worship the devil. I’ve heard it used as an argument against dancing, against playing games on Sunday, against watching television or movies or listening to certain kinds of music.

I don’t think Jesus had any of those things in mind (especially since the television hadn’t been invented yet). Nor do I think “these little ones” refers only to children (though certainly children are included). Because of how Jesus uses the Greek word translated as “these little ones” elsewhere in Luke’s gospel, I think Jesus here is talking about anyone who is, at present, ***being drawn to Jesus***. They are weak and vulnerable because they are “little ones” ***in the faith***, new to Christian things. They could easily be led astray by seeing the wrong example. But what is the wrong example? What are the “temptations to sin”?

You look at the context of Luke 17 and it seems clear to me. Jesus has specific temptations in mind. ***It’s the temptation to withhold forgiveness.*** Jesus says, “If you claim to follow me, don’t you dare tempt people new to the faith to walk away from it because you can’t forgive.”

Christians are above all else ***to love one another***, ***and loving people means being quick to forgive them.*** But if you start holding grudges and withholding love from others in the Christian community, and one of these “little ones” in the faith sees it, they will think, “I thought Jesus people were the ‘love people’, but I guess I was wrong about that. If that’s what it means to follow Jesus, I think I’ll pass.”

Some of you have had the great misfortune to be a part of a church that was going through a big fight for one reason or another. Is there anything quite as miserable as dreading Sunday mornings and feeling sick at your stomach on your way to church because you don’t know how bad it’s going to get this week? You don’t know who is going to pull you aside in the hallway and either chew you out or spew venom about someone else? Didn’t you hate going to some event in town and someone saying, “Hey, don’t you go to Such and Such Church? What in the world is going on there?” And did you see many baptisms while your church was going through that fight? Wasn’t telling people about Jesus the last thing on everyone’s mind?

The Greek word translated as “temptations to sin” is the word *skandalon.* Sometimes in the New Testament it’s translated as “stumbling block, and we get our word “scandal” from it. Jesus says, “It is a scandal when Christians refuse to forgive one another. And if these little ones, these brand new, delicate baby Christians new to your community stumble over the gospel because you refuse to forgive, you’d be better off never having been born in the first place.”

In a parallel passage in the gospel of Matthew we read this (I’m just going to read it, close my point with it, and make no commentary on it). “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ **22**Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’

“‘Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24**When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [in other words, an unimaginably large sum of money]. **25**And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26**So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” **27**And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **28**But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [perhaps five hundred dollars], and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, “Pay what you owe.” **29**So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” **30**He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **31**When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. **32**Then his master summoned him and said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33**And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” **34**And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. **35**So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.’” Matthew 18:21-35. There is nothing more important than forgiveness.

Second, there is a process to forgiveness. In other words, how do we forgive one another? If Jesus says it is important, vital, to forgive, then we can’t agree with those who say it’s dehumanizing or violent to do so.

Yet because forgiveness is important doesn’t mean that it’s simple or effortless to do so. There’s always a well-meaning Christian waiting to tell a wounded person, “You just need forgive and forget.” But the Bible never commands that we forget, and there is no magic button you can push that will erase select memories. Plus, it makes it sound like forgiveness is something you can achieve by making one, simple, easy decision.

I have watched a lot of the television show *The Office* over the years. The main character in that show is Michael Scott, played by Steve Carrell. Michael Scott is the manager of the Scranton branch of the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, and Michael is (there’s no delicate way to put this) an idiot. The show is funny because of his complete lack of social awareness.

In one episode, Michael is having money problems. He’s in a ton of debt because his spending is out of control. He walks into the breakroom and one of the other characters, Creed Bratton, says, “Hey cuz: I hear you’re having money problems … I got the answer. You declare bankruptcy, and all your problems go away … Bankruptcy, Michael, is nature’s do-over. It’s a fresh start.”

But, again, Michael is not an intelligent man. He has no idea how bankruptcy laws work. So, he walks out of the breakroom, into the main part of the office where all his employees are, clears his throat, and he yells, “I … declare … bankruptcy!”

Forgiveness is not like a Michael Scott bankruptcy. It’s not a one-time statement of “I declare forgiveness” and then it’s over. You can’t flip a switch and decide you have forgiven and then immediately have all these good feelings for the person who hurt you.

Forgiveness, instead, is a process. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him …”. Luke 17:3. The three-step process involves ***rebuke, repentance, and restoration.***

When you are wronged, you have an obligation to go to the person who offended you and tell them. Ideally, they would come to your first and apologize, but if they don’t you have this obligation. And you can’t rebuke them in an angry or self-righteous way (that would simply be another sin that would need to be forgiven and complicate everything), but with the hope of restoring the relationship, you go to this person and say, “What you did back there was wrong, and I didn’t appreciate it.”

Now that alone makes forgiveness a hard thing to practice, because when we are offended ***the last thing we want to do is go to the person and calmly and humbly tell them.*** Most of us grew up in a culture in the South where you just don’t do this. Instead, ***we stuff it. We act like it doesn’t bother us. We act like we’ve moved on.*** But we haven’t, because while we can pretend everything is ok between us and those who’ve hurt us things will never be right until we go through this process of forgiveness. God made relationships to work this way; we have no choice but to work these steps if we want healthy relationships.

The first step in the process of forgiveness is up to the person who is offended. The second step, however, is up to the person who offended. They must repent. They must express genuine regret over what they’ve done. No excuses, no blame-shifting, but instead, “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have done that. Please forgive me.” By way of application, if you’re a parent or a spouse, when was the last time you went to your husband, your wife, your children, and said, “I’m sorry; I really shouldn’t have said that”? If you can’t recall ever apologizing, then I’m not sure you should have any confidence at all that you actually follow Jesus.

Rebuke, repentance, and then forgiveness can take place. Then the offended person can say, “It’s ok. It’s over. I forgive you. Let’s move on,” and the relationship has been restored.

Therefore, we can see that forgiveness is neither easy nor simple, yet the situation I just outlined is the best possible environment in which forgiveness can take place, because Jesus is describing a situation involving ***minor offenses and a repentant person.***

In verse 4 Jesus says, “and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” Jesus here is not saying that the maximum you can forgive someone is seven times in a day. The number is symbolic. Jesus is saying that no matter how many times someone comes to you and genuinely asks for forgiveness you grant it.

But because of verse 4 we can be confident that what Jesus has in mind in Luke 17 are what I would call “minor offenses,” such as harsh remarks and thoughtless, unkind (but not malicious) actions. Why? ***Because you simply can’t engineer major betrayals several times a day.*** Major betrayals include a husband cheating on his wife, or one partner in a business stealing from another partner, or someone committing a violent crime against one of your loved ones. I’m not saying that you don’t work to forgive those kinds of sins. You do, but it’s a far more involved process, it involves far more time and pastoral care and counseling, and my point is simply that it’s not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus addresses “minor offenses” in Luke 17, and by way of example … several years ago, we were having an elder meeting, and I made a comment that was thoughtless and sarcastic. A few days after the meeting, one of the other elders came up to me and said, “J.D., you shouldn’t have said that. It offended me and probably some other guys in the room, too.” Now, my first reaction to being called out on my sin was to sin some more. I wanted to say, “Well, that’s too bad, I think it needed to be said.” Thankfully, that attitude lasted about a nanosecond. What I said a moment later was, “You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it. Do you think I should apologize to the other elders?” And he said, “No, it wasn’t that big of a deal. I think we can just move on.” And it was over. Not only did that elder love me enough to tell me, not only did he think enough of me to figure I was mature enough to handle his rebuke, but I ended up respecting him more for the way he handled it. What could have broken the relationship only enhanced it. I think it’s those kinds of minor offenses, offenses that can take place multiple times in the same day, that Jesus has in mind here, not major betrayals.

Nor does Jesus have in mind a situation where someone offends you and ***they are not repentant,*** because clearly Jesus says this process when there is repentance. What do you do with people who have wronged you and they aren’t sorry about it? They think they were justified in how that treated you. They think you’re the problem. If you ever deal with a narcissist or a sociopath or someone with borderline personality disorder, you’ll find this happening all the time.

What do you do? There’s a big debate in Christian scholarship around the question, “Are we expected to forgive an unrepentant person?” I’ll confess I don’t know the answer. There are good arguments on both sides. But I do know we must do the work to be ready to forgive even the unrepentant, even the major betrayals, so that ***we won’t be enslaved by bitterness.***

Hebrews 12:15 says, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled …”. When you’ve been wronged by someone else, that person has created evil, and now that evil is inside of you. It’s as if they’ve put the poison of bitterness inside your soul. The more grievous the wrong, the more unrepentant the person who did the evil is, the more powerful the poison inside of you. How can we fight this bitterness?

**First,** when you bump into the person who wronged you in town, and you want to give them a piece of your mind and tell them what an awful person they are, ***you don’t.*** **Second,** when you talk with other people, and this person’s name comes up, and you want to slander them and shred their reputation into pieces and tell everyone what they did, ***you don’t.* Third,** when this person comes to mind and you want so badly to replay the tapes of what they did to you and dwell on their wrongs and wish evil on this person, ***you don’t.*** You pray for grace not to think about it.

Some call those steps forgiveness, others say it’s getting your heart ready to forgive. What we call it doesn’t matter too much, but it’s what you do when you’ve been wronged even by people who aren’t sorry about it.

But it’s hard to work this process. When you’ve been hurt, it’s the last thing a sinner naturally wants to do. How do we get to the point where we want to forgive?

Third, the desire to forgive. The disciples heard Jesus say all this and their response was, “Jesus, this is impossible! There’s no way we can do this.” They say in verse 5: “Increase our faith!” Put another way, the disciples are saying, “Jesus, you haven’t given us what it takes to forgive like this.” Maybe that’s how you feel. You may be thinking with the disciples, “I do not have enough grace from God to forgive people this absolutely and constantly.”

But if that’s you, then in verse 6 Jesus gently corrects you. “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.” Now, there isn’t any indication in the rest of the New Testament or in early church history that the Apostles went around plucking up trees by faith and throwing them into oceans. This is hyperbole; Jesus exaggerates to make a point in rebuking the disciples.

They say, “Increase our faith so that we can forgive.” But Jesus says, “Your problem is not that you don’t have enough faith. You have more than enough faith. Your problem is that you have lost sight of me, the object of your faith, that gives faith its power.”

Because if you see your sins and the condemnation and judgment you deserve for your sins, and then you see (even the tiniest bit!) how in Jesus Christ God forgave your sins, then you’ll have all the faith you’ll ever need to run to genuinely repentant people who come and ask for your pardon and forgive them and restore them to a place of right relationship.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had someone see how you’re handling a difficult time in your life and say something like, “I wish I had your faith.” But if that happens, you need to correct them and say, “It’s not my faith you need. ***It’s my savior you need.***” If you see him, no matter how dimly, and see how much you’ve sinned against him, yet he still longs to forgive you, you won’t have any problem wanting to forgive and be reconciled to those who sin against you.

Those of you who are parents, think about it with me for a moment. Say you’ve got a rambunctious four-year-old boy. And all day long he’s been bad. Constantly into mischief. Constantly disobeying. He’s obstinate, he talks back to you. Your day has been one of continual discipline. Moms, have you ever had a day like that with one of your children?

But that night, after bath time, as you climb into bed with him to read him his bedtime story, he looks at you and with tears in his eyes, he says, “Mommy, I’m sorry.” What do you say to him? Do you say, “Well it’s about time you little brat!” No, you say, “It’s okay, honey, I forgive you.” And in that moment, you’re almost glad for how bad he was that day so that you could have that sweet time with him now.

If that’s how it is with us and our children, sinners though we are, ***how much more is it like that with us and God?*** Now, dear friends, think with me: who is it you need to forgive? Who is the person to whom you need to go and ask for forgiveness? If you’re a Christian, you have enough faith. You only need to take another look at your savior.

Then we read in verses 7-10, “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*** [“unprofitable servants” in the King James]; we have only done what was our duty.’ ”

In this illustration, Jesus makes it clear that we won’t get any special awards for forgiving people. It comes with the job of following Jesus. At the end of the day we’re only unworthy servants. He says, “You can either serve me or hold onto bitterness, but you can’t do both.”

Yet when you remember that when you forgive you’re only doing what a servant ***should*** do, ***you can also remember how Jesus has already served you.*** We are servants in God’s household, serving at his table, ***but at the Lord’s table we are reminded that Jesus served us first.*** We take this bread and cup, representing the body and blood of Jesus, reminding us that we forgive others because God first forgave us by forgetting our sins through Jesus Christ on the cross. When we see that, we’ll find all the desire to forgive others we’ll ever need. AMEN