

LUKE

Part 63: "In Light of Eternity" (pt. 3)

Luke 17:1-10

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Sunday, September 8, 2019 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

"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'" (Luke 17:1–10, ESV).

Introduction

This summer, my family and I became loyal fans of the Amarillo Sod Poodles.

By the grace of God's providence, the Sod Poodle's inaugural season coincided with my first ever sabbatical, which meant we got see lots of baseball games. And I have to say; it has been quite the joy to watch professional baseball in Amarillo, Texas.

For those of you who might not know this, Amarillo's team is the double-A affiliate of the San Diego Padres. Practically, what this means is that the guys who are playing in Amarillo are right on the cusp of making it into the big leagues. In fact, I believe that there were nine players that started their season in Amarillo this year that ended their season in San Diego as major league players. There is something amazing about watching men who have pursued and worked hard toward their dream since they were in little league walk into its reality.

But one thing that this summer has reminded me of is when you are watching a professional baseball game. What you are really watching is a group of men who have mastered the basics of the game. Sure there are pitchers that can throw crazy curve balls and fastballs that clock in at over a 100mph. Sure there are guys who can hit a home run that goes over the stadium walls and into the parking lot. But more than that, these players are men who have mastered what it means to play catch and hit a baseball with a bat.

My wife was with my youngest son in downtown Amarillo the other day, and together they were watching the Sod Poodles practice. And do you know what they saw? They saw Owen Miller, a professional in-fielder, hitting off of a tee. Do you know what you will see these pros doing right before a game starts? Playing catch. No matter how far they have progressed in their careers, and no matter how close they are to making it to the show, they have never ceased to practice the basics every day. In fact, they know that it is mastery of the every-day basics of baseball that will help them achieve their goal of the big leagues.

Christianity too has a great goal. We are called by the word of God to set our hearts and our hopes on eternity. In fact, in the last few passages that we have studied in Luke, this topic is exactly what Jesus has been talking about. He has been talking about heaven and hell and how we are to live in light of the eternal future that awaits us.

In today's passage, Jesus is going to challenge his disciples to live in light of eternity, but doing so in the practical realm of our every-day relationships. In other words, we are to press toward the upward call of our eternal goal (cf. Phil. 3:14), but how we seek eternity in this life has everything to do with the Christian basics of loving one another well, especially when it comes to our relationships with fellow believers. What Jesus is telling us in this teaching is something that we have the opportunity to practice every day of our lives. And if you think about it, our relationships with other believers are eternally important because they are one of the few things we get to take from this life into eternity.

So with that in mind, I want to walk through three major commands Jesus gives in this passage: *1.) In light of eternity, be considerate, 2.) In light of eternity, be gracious, and 3.) In light of eternity, be humble.*

Exposition

1. In light of eternity, be considerate.

Martin Luther writes in his 95 Theses: *"Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ["Repent!"] (Mt. 4:17), willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance."*¹ Every disciple of Jesus is called to live a life of repentance. That is, we are to turn away from sin, and turn to a God who is better than our sin.

But Jesus is showing us that our call to repentance isn't just something we do to benefit our own individual spirituality. Repentance is something we do to help one another too. The way we live our lives has the capacity to help or hurt others in their relationship with God.

Are we living our lives in such a way that we are helping the people who are around us draw closer to God or are we living in such a way that we actually hurt people in their

¹ Martin Luther, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences: October 31, 1517*, electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1996).

relationship with God? Jesus shows us this is no small matter: **“And he said to his disciples, ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!’”** (Luke 17:1, ESV). In other words, it is impossible to live in a world that is fractured by sin and not experience temptation. But we need to live in a self-aware and considerate way so that we are not the source of another believer’s temptation.

“Woe to the one through whom they come.” You might wonder what the word “woe” (ὠαί) means. If you grew up in West Texas or watching western movies, you might think that “woe” is something you say to a horse to get it to settle down. But in the Bible, the word “woe” means something far more serious.

Woe is a prophetic term that the Old Testament prophets would use to pronounce certain judgment. In the days of the Old Testament, a prophet was like representative that God sent to speak on his behalf to his people. When God rescued Israel from Egypt, he made a covenant with them. If God’s people obeyed the terms of the covenant, they would get blessings. But if they broke God’s covenant, they would receive curses.

So when God’s people were beginning to break the covenant, God would send a prophet like Amos or Isaiah to call God’s people back to faithfulness. At first, they would give a word of warning to God’s people that judgment was coming if they did not repent. But if they refused, the prophet would give a word of “woe.” “Woe” meant that the verdict had been reached. God’s people were guilty, and judgment was coming.

In other words, “woe” is a very serious word. And Jesus is saying, woe unto you if you are causing other people to fall into temptation.

He goes onto say, **“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 17:2, ESV). This is actually a pretty graphic image. An ancient millstone was so heavy that it took a donkey to move it. If it was tied around your neck, and you were dropped into a lake, there would be no coming back. But as bad as the millstone is, it is the preferred option when compared to eternal punishment. This sounds fierce. But fierce is the love that God has for his “little ones” (μικρῶν).

So who are the “little ones” in our lives? When we look at the other instances where Jesus uses this phrase, it becomes apparent that “little ones” can mean literal children, perhaps even our own children. Other times the term “little ones” can refer to fellow Christians who are young or immature in their faith.² Overall, a “little one” is someone who has a still-forming and vulnerable faith in God.

Jesus is calling every Christian believer, every Christian parent, and especially every Christian leader to live their lives in such a way that is considerate of other believers. Every month, I meet with a group of senior pastors of various churches in Amarillo to pray for the city. And one of the things we often pray for is that no of us would do something that would bring dishonor to the name of Jesus or cause others to stumble.

² See R.T. France. *The Gospel of Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 264-265.

Despite our culture of individualism, “no man is an island.” We are connected to one another, and our words and actions to one another can ripple through eternity.

2. In light of eternity, be gracious.

Look at verses 3 and 4: “*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*” (Luke 17:3–4, ESV).

Forgiveness is a topic Jesus cares about very much. In fact, in the “Lord’s prayer,” Jesus even teaches us to pray, “*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (cf. Mt. 6:12; Lk. 11:4).

In some ways, our capacity to experience forgiveness is contingent upon our capacity to forgive. We can’t receive the gift of grace with a fist that is clenched in bitterness. We receive grace with open hands that are willing to give grace as much as they are willing to receive grace. Christians are a forgiven people, and we are called to forgive even our enemies.

But even as I say this, I want to be clear on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not saying that the person you hurt you was in the right or that it was your fault that you got hurt. Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing a way that you have been sinned against by someone. Forgiveness does not mean that you shouldn’t have healthy boundaries with people who have hurt you in the past. Forgiveness does not mean that you don’t report something to authorities when a crime has been committed.

Forgiveness means that you have refused to put yourself in the place of God over a person who has sinned against you. When someone sins against you, there is a need for justice that is created. There is now a debt that needs to be paid. Forgiveness is saying: “I have been wronged, but I refuse to bring spiritual judgment on a person. I will instead lay my case before the Lord, and he will be the one who brings about my justice.”

Forgiveness is not a command God calls us to just for the sake of being nice people. We are called to forgive because forgiveness is freedom, and unforgiveness is bondage. Staying bitter is like drinking poison and hoping your enemy gets sick – it only hurts you. But this does not mean forgiveness is easy!

For this reason, the call to forgive is rooted not in good-will or will-power but in faith. The apostles recognize this.³ When Jesus brings the command to forgive in this radical way, the disciples rightly ask for more faith: “*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*” (Luke 17:5–6, ESV).

³ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 204.

The power to forgive flows from faith that believes that God is good, that God is just, and that God has the power to right all wrongs. He is the God who has experienced the worst that this evil world has to offer, and he is the God who will one day bring all evil to an end. You can entrust your pain to him. You can rest in him. He will bring forth our justice like the dawn (cf. Ps. 37:6-7). *Jesus will be your vindication. Grace will be your freedom.*

Even a little bit of faith is enough to prevail over the power of darkness and bitterness of our hearts.

God might be challenging you right now to forgive someone in your heart. And if that is a struggle, he might be inviting you to cry out in prayer to him for more faith. That is a prayer I believe he always wants to answer.

3. In light of eternity, be humble before the Lord.

In Jesus's day and age, large farms were operated by a staff of people who doubled as farmhands and house servants. They worked in the field in the day and then had responsibilities to take care of their boss at night. It would be unthinkable for a servant to come in and feel entitled to a meal and rest before his master (cf. Lk. 17:7-8).

So too, Jesus is saying, we should not expect personal glory and acclaim for our works of righteousness (Lk. 17:9). Before the God who has provided every good thing we have, we are but unworthy servants (Δοῦλοι) (Lk. 17:10).

Now some of you might push back and say, "If we are nothing but servants, does that mean that we are not valuable to God?" Quite the contrary: God's people were so valuable to him that God sent his son to die for us so that all who believe in Jesus might have eternal life!" (cf. Jn. 3:16). Elsewhere in Scripture, we are even called adopted children (Gal. 4:5), and a people own God's own possession (1 Pt. 2:9)!

So what does it mean that we are servants? It means *there is no work that we can do that can ever put God into our debt. It means that even our righteous deeds are ultimately rooted in and empowered by the grace of God. It means all the crowns in heaven belong to Jesus (cf. Rev. 4:10).*

No matter how much you mature as a Christian, you never get to graduate from being a "servant" of God. Do you want to know why I know that? Because even the Apostles – men who knew Jesus, walked with Jesus, did miracles in Jesus's name, and wrote Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – even these men saw themselves primarily as servants:

- **"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1, ESV).**

- *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings” (James 1:1, ESV).*
- *“Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1, ESV).*
- *“Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1, ESV).*
- *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John” (Revelation 1:1, ESV).*

The apostles saw themselves as servants even before they saw themselves as apostles.

If the apostles saw themselves primarily as servants, so should we. In light of our eternal God who is more gracious and kind and powerful than we could ever imagine, the only right posture of the heart is humility.

Now humility is often a very misunderstood virtue. Many people equate humility with self-humiliation; a self-deprecating groveling and lack of security and confidence. Is this true humility? Not at all.

True humility is a view of self that is neither too high or too low. It is a way of life wherein our thoughts of self are outshone by the overwhelming light of God's glory and goodness.

Humility is not making our self smaller than we are. Humility is understanding God for how big he really is.

Conclusion

These are good commandments. These are true commandments. But these are not easy commandments to obey. And we are not meant to live the Christian life in our own strength. Rather, we are to walk in imitation of the cross by the power of the cross.

Jesus gives these commandments not as a divine tyrant, but as one who was willing to take on human flesh and live the life that he calls his people to live.

He is the one who lived the perfect life on behalf of his little ones.

He is the one who forgave his enemies, even those who crucified him.

He is the one who is the rightful master of the universe but became like a servant for our sake.

As the Apostle Paul says the Philippians: *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:1–11, ESV).

AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Starters

1. *Read Luke 17:1-10 and summarize Jesus’s teaching in your own words.*
2. *What does it look like to be considerate of the “little ones” in your life (Lk. 17:1-2)?*
3. *How might God be challenging you to walk in grace toward others this week (Lk. 17:3-4)?*
4. *How is forgiveness be empowered by faith (Lk. 17:5-6)?*
5. *Read Luke 17:7-10 again along with Rom. 1:1, James 1:1, 2 Pt. 1:1, Jude 1, and Rev. 1:1. Why is it so important for Christians (and even the Apostles!) to see themselves as servants in relationship to God? How would adopting this identity shape our everyday life?*

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