**Luke 17:1-10** September 25, 2022

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*Luke 17:1 Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2It 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. 3So watch yourselves.*

*“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” 5The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”*

*6He 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.*

*7“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’? 8Would 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’? 9Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’ ”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Lord, Give Us a Faith That Delights in Duty!**

We Lutherans love our Bibles. We love God’s word. A slogan of the Lutheran Reformation was “Scripture Alone.” We believe that the only place we are guaranteed to find the absolute truth of God’s will is in the Bible. A good Lutheran should wear out a Bible or two in his or her life time.

If you are a good Lutheran, let me shock you: We can be very thankful that some things have been added something to the Bible. No, they didn’t add to God’s Word, *per se*, but they did add chapter divisions and verse markers—those were added about a thousand years later. Without those, it would be way more difficult to navigate our Bibles. Imagine trying to find a Bible passage without chapter or verse numbers! More recently, modern translations also insert little headings every five or ten or twenty verses to let us know when we move on to a new event or subject. For example, right after our reading it says, “Ten Healed of Leprosy.” If you ever want to find the ten lepers, it’s a lot easier scanning the headings than scanned every verse.

Well, for today’s reading, the translators wanted to put a heading in there. So they looked at these ten verses and asked themselves what to call it, but they really weren’t able to get their arms around it. So, they put in the heading, “Sin, Faith, Duty.” “Sin, faith, duty?” That could be about just about anything! Thanks, guys! But when you read these verses you begin to understand: this reading goes in just about every direction.

I would suggest that a unifying thought is found, not at the beginning, but the end. In last phrase of our reading Jesus says, ***“When you have done everything you were told to do, [you] should say… ‘We have only done our duty.’”*** Do you realize what that means?

There is a military decoration, the highest one that can be awarded: the Medal of Honor. Read up on it and it is fascinating. One curious detail that probably only us civilians don’t know is that it is the only military honor that is not pinned on the uniform. Anyway, this medal of honor is awarded to those, who act “above and beyond the call of duty.” Yet most awardees say, “No, I didn’t.” In verse 10 Jesus says that nothing any of us ever does will be above and beyond the call of duty to service of our God. There is no Medal of Honor for Christians.

Those are hard words! And they come at the end of a section of Scripture where Jesus tells us some hard things. These things are not things you can do 90% and say, “I’m doing pretty well.” Such a person has not done their duty. Even if you did 100%—and no one but Jesus has, but let’s just say—you would only be at the thinnest margin of barely passing. But we fall far short of this time and again!

If this makes you feel beat up and discouraged, that’s because this is the Law. There is Law and there is Gospel. The Law is everything that God wants and expects us to do. In today’s reading we hear God tell us a lot of things we should be doing. He tells us our duty. And while we can say to ourselves, “I’m doing better than I used to do,” or “At least I’m not like that Christian sitting on the other side of the church,” there is no “Good enough” with God’s Law. AND… When Jesus talks about tying heavy rocks around people’s necks and tossing them out of a boat for doing things we are very prone to doing, we realize that God takes his Law and our sin a whole lot more seriously than we do.

Dear Christian, This is what is going to happen today if you actually listen to Jesus with the humility you ought: you are going to feel on the brink of despair. We fall short. We just do. Every day. If you would say otherwise, you deceive yourself. Even as Christ’s people, at best we sometimes do some of these things. And so I must counsel you to remember not just these ten verses of Law. Remember also the Gospel. The Gospel doesn’t tell us what we are supposed to do, but what Jesus has done. That’s the difference between the discouraging Law and the life-giving Gospel. The Gospel reminds us how Jesus came to cleanse us from the stench of sin that clings to our bodies, our words, our actions from birth to death. The Gospel tells us how Jesus offered his life as a ransom, to pay the debt of our sins. Find comfort there. Even as I preach this morning and you feel the anxiety rise because of all the things that Jesus tells you to do that you don’t, and maybe even don’t really want to, run to Jesus! Plead his forgiveness. Clothe yourself with his righteousness!

With that Gospel, God’s “I love you for Jesus’ sake” ringing in your heart, then hear what else our Lord tells us. Listen to how he teaches us to be his servants who don’t save themselves, but bring glory to him.

**I.A.** One duty he spends quite a bit of time on is how we are to deal with sin.

The first way we deal with sin is by not being accomplices of sin. ***“Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.”*** Jesus talks about ***“things that cause people to sin.”*** He is talking about temptation. There will be temptations in this fallen world. It is unavoidable. But do not—I repeat—do not be the person through whom temptation comes.

Jesus warns strongly not to trip up other people with temptation!  ***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.’”***

Of course, we Christians would never do that, right? We would never tempt people to sin. Except we do.

We tempt people to sin when we actively invite people to partake of the sins we are involved with. Lines like “Don’t worry, everybody does this” and “Nobody ever gets caught” and “But you’ll enjoy it”—if those words are coming from our mouths, we should stop in horror, because Jesus tells us that we have become minions of Satan. This includes seductive dressing, or dirty texting. If you tempt people to sin, Jesus says, “Get the rope. Where’s the millstone? This is what people who lead others into sin deserve.”

We also tempt people to sin by disparaging their Christian duties – by telling them that they can surely skip church for a week: “You owe it to the family;” By mocking someone as a lightweight who refuses an extra drink; By berating a spouse for putting so much money to God’s work when we could use it much better at home; By rolling eyes at people who feel that a certain movie is over-the-line for their Christian sensitivities. All of these sorts of things—and the list is limitless—are things that disparage and derail Christians who are doing God’s will. Jesus says, “It’d be better to take that guy out in the middle of the Atlantic and toss him overboard!”

We are people through whom ***“things that cause people to sin”*** come when we live bad examples. Maybe we couldn’t care less if people do or don’t take part. But you know, just the act of sin is an invitation to others to sin. It normalizes what God hates. This is one of the poisons of letting church attendance slide. It normalizes it and discourages the rest. Did you ever work at a job where petty theft was part of the work environment? Did you get sucked into it after a while? Did you ever belong to an organization where foul language, excessive drinking, and lewd behavior was the norm? We like to imagine ourselves rocks who can’t be moved from the foundations of our Christian faith, but we know how prone we are to mimic the sins other people are enjoying. If we have contributed to that morally toxic atmosphere, Jesus says, “Find me a boat, a rope and a rock!”

Do not, do not be party to anyone else’s sin. Especially, says Jesus, regarding ***“these little ones.”*** This certainly includes children. Parents, when they hear that, should shudder! No one needs to repent on a daily basis like parents need to. From the moment of our child’s birth, yes, even before birth, our children are getting acclimated to our behaviors. Watching eyes see and repeat. So do listening ears. From young, children either get used to being in God’s house or they don’t, they get used to prayer or they don’t, they get used to giving to God or they don’t. God forgive us parents for the times we have not only influenced the next generation toward sin, but actually imprinted it on them!

But ***“these little ones”*** are not just children. Jesus also has in mind those who are new to the faith or easily influenced by stronger wills. How shocking it is for some to go through the Bible Instruction Class, to be on fire for Jesus, and then to see the indifference so many have to God and his will. “I guess it’s really not that big a deal…” they think, and they move along.

That’s why Jesus said, ***“Woe to that person”*** through whom temptation comes. Not “Whoa” like stop the horses. “Woe—w-o-e” is a special word Jesus used to pronounce judgment on soul destroyers. Souls are being abused, broken down, and finally, if it continues, can be led to destruction. No wonder Jesus talked about the millstone! Yes, one thing we become aware of is that sin is so much more serious an issue to God than it is to us!

**B.** There is something else about sin. If we really care about other people, Jesus says in verse 3, ***“If your brother sins, rebuke him.”*** In matters of sin, when it comes to our brother or sister in faith, we have a special duty to warn them of their sin. Pastors and elders are called to do this. Understand that if I or an elder ever bring up a perceived sin, we don’t do it to nag or belittle or get rid of you. Christ told us to do that because sin destroys souls. Jesus also commits this work to the average Christian in the pew. To simply sit on the sideline and claim, “It’s none of my business,” is to take the easy way out. Those who avoid confronting sin are brothers to the soul-destroyer who tempts others. Jesus wants sin to be confronted. Having said that, how often people are receptive, and sometimes deeds have been misinterpreted!

**C.** The goal of confronting sin is not repentance. Repentance is just a waystation. What was it Jesus said? ***“If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him.”*** That’s the goal! The reason we must go through the hard work of confronting sin, or the humiliation of confessing the wrongness of our sin is because Jesus said that’s the channel through which forgiveness becomes ours. Forgiveness is not for the unrepentant! But forgiveness is sweet reconciliation with God and God’s people.

Then Jesus goes on to say, ***“If [your brother] sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.’”*** All kinds of questions come into our minds. I would say, “Tell all those questions to be gone and to simply remember Jesus’ command, ***“****If he says seven times,* ***‘I repent,’ forgive him.”***

**II.** Having just heard about 20 seconds worth of instruction that we will spend a lifetime trying to master, Jesus’ disciples say exactly the right thing: ***“Lord, increase our faith!”*** They understand. Maybe you don’t, but these twelve who sometimes seem kind of clueless to us, they get it exactly right. I can’t make myself more forgiving. I can’t make myself more willing to lovingly confront sin. I can’t make myself forsake the things I love for the good of Christian brothers and sisters. ***“Lord, increase our faith.”*** We aren’t asking God for more saving faith, but more simple trust. Trust that says, “Because you said it God, I need to squelch all my questions and do it! Increase my faith, my trust!”

And Jesus tells them that even little faith can do amazing things. I think Jesus was speaking in hyperbole here, but maybe you could go around tearing mulberry trees out of the ground. But to what end? A little faith in Christ can do something far more productive than uprooting trees! It can make us do the seemingly impossible. Christ’s love for us can give us such love that we freely forgive repentant people, even people who have really hurt us. Christ’s love for us gives us such love that we confront sin. Christ’s love for us gives us such love that we can set aside our freedoms—oh, how we love our freedoms—and let ourselves be servants for the good of others.

And at the end we can say, not because we have done so well, but because we trust our Savior, “Whatever sin has been done, is mine. And whatever good has been done, it Christ’s. Thank you, Lord, for making me yours, even though I am unworthy!” Amen.