
Luke 17:1-10. Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. ² 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. ³ So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." ⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ He 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'? ⁸ Would 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'? ⁹ Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 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.'"

Increase our Faith!

1) Enable us to watch out for each other!

2) Help us watch out for our souls!

It's a familiar sight on Friday nights in the fall; those lights standing above the small town skyline light up the night sky. And under those lights young athletes are not only playing a game, but they are learning important lessons about working together as a team and striving toward a common goal. In football, much like many other team sports, there is a responsibility that each athlete holds to his or her teammates. Players are coached to work together not only with personal goals and achievements on their mind, but they are to be constantly aware of the good of the team. If a player commits a foolish penalty or fails to carry out an assignment or duty, it hurts the whole team. If a player fulfills his or her role well this often benefits the entire group. This dynamic in team sports encourages a consciousness of "*what I do personally can have a positive or negative effect on others around me.*" There's an accountability to the group that can serve to motivate personal growth and improvement.

In our lesson today Jesus brings this truth to light for his disciples in regard to their faith. Through faith we are connected to Christ. By his grace he chose us. Despite our condemning faults, our great and many sins, he saves us and he sets us aside for his good and rather lofty purpose. We are made a part of God's team - so to speak - and therefore as we are all connected to Christ, we are also connected to each other. Because of this connection, we have a duty, a responsibility to those around us, especially to our fellow believers.

Whether or not you ever played football or any other sport in your life, this is the type of lesson that Jesus lays before us today. We have a duty that includes a consciousness that what we do as individuals can have a negative or positive impact on our neighbor and

especially our brothers and sisters in the faith. And this one summary of our duty as Christians: to abstain from sin, to give forgiveness, and serve our neighbor. We have a responsibility to God, to ourselves, and to each other, to live out our Christian faith out of thanks to God for all that he has done for us. This is an awesome privilege, and a high calling. God chose us for this very purpose, but unfortunately we are sinful, we are weak. We easily lose sight of the will of God, we forget about our connection to him and to each other. Therefore, like the disciples before us, as we consider this high calling, as we consider our Christian duty, we pray, Lord, increase our faith!

Our LORD Jesus has the power to do just that. Through the divine wisdom of his instruction Jesus makes us aware and conscious of this connection to others as he calls his disciples to watch their own lives closely. He explains that we ought to be careful not to cause our fellow Christians to stumble or fall into sin. And our Savior uses some impressive and passionate language to illustrate his point. Think of a football coach giving an impassioned speech in the locker room at half-time, but then consider how the stakes are even higher than a mere game as Jesus talks about the seriousness of sin and our responsibility to our fellow man. ***Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. ² 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.*** That's quite a warning, to say the least. We are to watch how our lives honor God so as not to negatively affect those around us.

As we live out our lives as Christians we will face temptations from the devil himself and we will have to struggle against the ways of a sinful world. Not only is this a difficult challenge, but the LORD Jesus reminds us that sin is unavoidable in this world. But just because it is common and expected that does not mean it should be accepted. Or that it is not serious. As a follower of Christ living in such a sinful world, Christians will struggle against sin and the forces of evil as we strive to live for our God. However, you and I must be careful that we do not by our sinful actions become allies of the evil one. We must be careful that we do not become a tool that the devil regularly uses to cause others - especially those new to the faith or immature in their faith - to fall into temptation and to break the holy will of God.

For example: the gossip who continues unabashed in this sin says to those around that this behavior is just fine as others are given the impression that they are free to join in on breaking the 8th commandment. The couple living together before marriage sends a message to the younger generation that this is normal and downplays the importance of marriage, and thus God's command that marriage should be honored by all is discarded by not only this couple but others still. The Christian parents who are indifferent towards worship and bible study may carelessly teach their children that time in God's Word and God's house is unimportant, and the preaching and teaching of God's Word is despised and neglected. The older brother who gets drunk, the co-worker who tells lies, the neighbor who steals, the one who tells dirty jokes, who treats people cruelly, who calls people names, who is obsessed with wealth, who promotes false teaching, who is petty and refuses to forgive, who holds on to a grudge, who hates, who curses, who swears needlessly by God's name, those who regularly indulge in these and other such sinful ways grieve the heart of God. And such a sinful life is not only a detriment to the personal life of the individual, but such a careless life

of sin can result in disheartening spiritual collateral damage as others view this behavior as license for them to sin. The Christian who takes sin lightly is not only sinning against God, but is misrepresenting Christ, and he or she may even be giving a fellow Christian an excuse to sin. And what does Jesus say to such a person, what does Jesus say to you and me, when we treat sin so lightly. ***Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe, to that person through whom they come!... So watch yourselves!***

Maybe it is a hallmark of our culture as a nation that promotes the individual above the group. Maybe it has to do with the amount of time that we try to carve out our own place in this life - day after day. Maybe it is the personal nature of our homes and lives or merely the selfish nature of our sinful hearts and minds; whatever the case may be, the concept of community and duty and accountability to each other is a weakness of many Christians today. In our personal weakness we lose sight of the commands of God, we fall into sin, and in the process far too often we completely forget about or we ignore our responsibility to each other. In ignorance, or carelessness, we cause people to fall into sin. We may even throw up our hands and use the excuse that, *we are all sinful after all*, to avoid being the kind of neighbor that God wants us to be.

And so Jesus specifically instructs his disciples to be aware of others and to carry out their Christian duty to God. He tells them what not to do: Do not cause others to sin. And then he gives them an example of what they should do: ***"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*** Jesus gives his disciples these instructions and they basically respond, *Wow! This is a big responsibility. Help us!* ***⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"***

This all seems to be the sort of thing that falls under the category: easier said than done. We are sinful. We are weak. And Jesus is telling his disciples, he is telling us, to not only watch out for ourselves, but to watch out for others! But the two go hand in hand, don't they? If I am careful to watch out for my personal faith, if I am connected to Christ in his Word, I can do amazing things as I follow his commands and carry out his will. Jesus puts it this way, ***He 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.*** Connected to Christ you can do amazing things. We can forgive people their sins. We can shine with the light of Christ. The faith that he gives you is life changing. He has called you to be his own. He has given you his Holy Spirit. He speaks to you with words of divine wisdom and love through his Holy Word. He has set you free from slavery to sin and death and he enables you to do amazing things for God and for each other. Connected to Christ you can stand in his forgiveness and you can forgive a person who sins against you over and over again, because you know of the love of Christ who has forgiven you for sin after sin. Connected to Christ you can stand in his forgiveness and with the courage and confidence that comes from faith you can rebuke and instruct a fellow believer and lift him or her up in their faith, knowing that this is God's will that we support and encourage each other. By God's grace when you are connected to Christ your personal relationship with God will be stronger, you will more readily follow the will of God, and this will put you in a better position to help rather others follow and learn about Christ. This connection, this accountability, and responsibility, that

you and I have, especially with our fellow believers, is designed by Christ to motivate personal growth and improvement for you and me and for the rest of the body of believers.

You and I have a duty, a blessed responsibility, to live our lives in a way that builds up our fellow believers, that strengthens our brothers and sisters in the faith, especially those who are new to the faith (children, young people, and recent converts) for we have been brought together through the gift of faith and now we strive together toward a common goal. People who have been Christians all their lives, new church members, those who have wandered from the faith and now have been found again, little children, young and alone alike, we are all brought together by the Holy Spirit and we are bound together in the blessed union of faith. And within this arrangement it is the mature Christian, the one who has been fed and nourished by the word, who has grown in their faith through years of instruction and daily practice, this type of Christian is one that God wants to use to bring growth to others. This is not a case where a certain level of tenure gives a person some free pass to sin or be complacent in their faith; nor is this level of spiritual longevity or maturity give a person reason to brag or to boast or look down on others. This is simply being part of the body of Christ. This is the gracious design of our wise and loving God. As a teammate with more experience may help out a member of the team with less experience so also God wants us to help each other in our faith.

The apostle Paul once wrote to the Romans. ***For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*** Dear friends, we belong to the LORD and because we belong to him we also in a certain sense belong to each other. Our LORD God keeps us safe, he leads us away from temptation, he delivers us from evil; and in doing so he often uses the church. He uses a Christian congregation and even our larger Christian fellowship to surround us with positive influences as we live in a world that is opposed to us and as we fight against the foe that battles against us. Jesus Christ unites us to himself, He unites us to each other, and He gives us this blessed responsibility and duty.

Membership in Christ's church, as well as membership in a local congregation, is not trite and trivial thing. It is not about perks, or privilege, or status. It is about being connected with Christ and with each other. We are the body of Christ, put together so that we might steer each other away from evil, and direct each other towards that which is good. And like a team we strive together toward a common goal, but ours is, in fact, a truly glorious and eternal goal. Even in our small town setting, in our humble congregations, the Light of the World, Jesus Christ shines brightly among us. Our God blesses us with this tremendous purpose, this most glorious common goal. Our LORD Jesus has graciously called us to faith and set aside undeserving sinners for this wondrous purpose: to give glory to God in the here and now and one day to enjoy the glorious realms of heaven together. Lord continue to increase our faith so that we may daily carry out this most honorable duty of serving you and our neighbor! Amen.