

Sin & Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 17, reading from verse 1 to verse 10. Luke chapter 17, reading from verse 1. Jesus said to his disciples, Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.

It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves.

If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, and seven times come back to you saying, I repent, you must forgive them.

The apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. 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.

Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, Come along now and sit down to eat?

[1 : 09] Won't he rather say, Prepare my supper, get yourself ready, and wait on me while I eat and drink? After that you may eat and drink. Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?

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. Okay, Luke chapter 17.

Do have the first few verses of that open in front of you if you can. Most of us, I'm sure most of us enjoy a nice bag of pick and mix. Here we've been using the excuse of making the children do sums with money, using that as an excuse to have our own little pick and mix sweetie shop over the past months.

When it comes to sweets, a wide assortment is often fun, isn't it? But what do we do when it looks like we have a random pick and mix bag in God's Word?

The ten verses that we read this morning, they certainly seem that way, don't they? I mean, they're under a single heading here in the NIV Bible, but often split into two or three headings in other versions. And I think actually four distinct themes in these ten verses.

[2 : 23] We start with the question of sin, then move from that into rebuke and forgiveness. And then faith and then duty in the parable of the closing verses. What do we do? Well, lots of people look at it and say, well, Luke has taken things that Jesus said on a variety of occasions and has brought them together here in his narrative.

Folks, we don't need to be troubled by that possibility. Remember when Luke said right back at the start of his Gospel, he said his intention is to write an orderly account.

That doesn't necessarily mean a chronological account. Luke's intention is to introduce us to Jesus. And so he does seem to, at times, bring together material thematically rather than in the order of occurrence.

That doesn't need to worry us. He's accurately recording what Jesus said, even if he said it at slightly different times in terms of the sequence of events.

And there are, in fact, some potential thematic links here in Luke 17. I mean, the leap from sin in those first couple of verses, the leap from that to forgiveness in verses 3 and 4, that's hardly a dramatic leap at all, is it?

[3 : 38] And then with Jesus setting in those verses some very high standards of what his disciples might do, Well, the disciples listening to him, they quite reasonably suggest that these standards are going to need an increase of faith.

Having discussed that, there's then a danger that kind of carrying out these things or having that great faith, that that might make them feel puffed up and entitled.

And so Jesus talks about duty. That's one possible sequence of connections. But honestly, it doesn't actually matter so much why these things are here in the order they are. What matters is Jesus said these things, and we should listen to what he said. And since they're not tightly connected to one another, and since each of these different four themes bears kind of teasing out and developing and thinking through, and we're going to take two weeks over these ten verses.

So we'll consider verses one to four today, and then five to ten next week. So today, sin and forgiveness. Jesus said to his disciples, Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.

[4 : 51] It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them.

And if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, and seven times come back to you saying, I repent, you must forgive them. So four verses, four themes this morning.

First couple of verses, we see Jesus' attitude, don't we? We see Jesus' righteous anger against attackers. And we see also Jesus' passionate protection of those he loves.

There's kind of an implicit call to action here in those verses, arguably made explicit in the first sentence of verse three. So watch yourselves.

That sentence seems to apply kind of both to those first two verses, and then also to introduce the following verses. And then in that second paragraph, verses three and four, the calls to action there are more explicit, some particular commands.

[5 : 52] So our third heading, rebuke one another. And fourth, forgive one another. So that's where we're heading. Verse one, Jesus is open and honest.

Jesus is clear. Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come. There are plenty of temptations in the world. There's no pretending that that's not the case.

There's no getting away from that. There are numerous things in our own hearts and numerous things in the world around us, things that cause us to sin, or at least lead us into temptation.

This much is unavoidable, and that is a sobering thought in itself. But that isn't Jesus' primary focus here, is it? Jesus' concern in these verses is with a situation where one person is the cause of another person's sin.

The anger that Jesus expresses in these verses is directed towards those who are a cause of stumbling to others. Now, in this idea of someone who causes another to sin, maybe your mind goes naturally to the somewhat caricatured idea of the temptress, that the woman of Proverbs 7, dressed like a prostitute with crafty intent, leading astray a plucky hero with her brazen face and her perfumed bet.

[7 : 13] That sort of thing certainly would be included in what Jesus says here in Luke 17. That is one way in which we might cause one another to stumble. And of course, it doesn't only apply to a woman tempting a man into sexual sin, but the reverse as well.

But remember, whilst the world is obsessed with sex, whilst certain forms of sexual deviance are one of the few categories where society at large kind of still retains something akin to an idea of sin, whilst that's one of the ways that we slightly agree with society in one respect, this is far from Jesus' dominant concern, is it?

It's not just about the temptress in that classical sense. Causing one another to stumble could be inviting somebody to join you in any number of visible and attractive sins, from sex through drunkenness, gossip, and so on and so on and so on.

Different ways that we might sin together, that we might lead one another to join us in sin. But it's not also, sorry, it's not even just about sins that we invite others to join us in, but rather also ways that we, in our actions, cause somebody to sin in a distinct way.

So it's also flaunting our possessions in a way that's calculated to incite envy in another, to cause them to covet. You're then guilty of your own pride and of leading another astray into jealousy.

[8 : 45] And isn't it also deliberately behaving in a way that you know winds up the people that you live with, leading them to lose their patience, leading them into anger?

And deeper, perhaps, than our behavior, isn't it also what we say, what we teach? It's hard, I think, to think of a clearer example of causing someone to stumble than to say, there is no God.

There is no such thing as judgment. Hell is not real. It causes people to stumble, doesn't it? And yet people do say these things, and some people say these things whilst holding the office of pastor. I mean, it's certainly not just church ministers. If the man in the street knows only one or two people who call themselves Christians, and that one person who they know, that person denies the reality of God's judgment, then that person, by denying God's judgment, has deprived his friend of the warning that God intends him to have.

He's a cause of stumbling. He's culpable for this man's sin or failing to repent. A cause of stumbling. Denying the warnings of God's word.

[9 : 55] It's people who call good what God calls wicked. If I say, this thing is not sin, or even I say, this thing is good. If I say that of something that God calls sin, then I lead others astray, don't I?

It's a cause of stumbling. When the world around us calls something good, and God's word calls it wicked, well, we're tempted, aren't we, to go along with the world and to agree that it's good.

Or at least to keep quiet, to not say that it's wicked. We might not affirm it, but we're not going to admit that we think it's wicked either. But if we do that, will we cause others to stumble?

We cause people to sin, thinking that they're doing right. We cause people to think that Christians approve of this behavior. We imply that God approves of this behavior.

We are a cause of stumbling. And finally, finally, if we point to any other hope than Christ himself, we are a cause of stumbling.

[11 : 02] If we suggest, as a response to somebody's sinful past, if we suggest that the right response is, well, live a better life now, then we are a cause of stumbling.

Because we have denied them access to the only possible remedy. The remedy is not, live well now. The remedy is, throw yourself on the mercy of Christ.

And to fail to proclaim that is to be a cause of stumbling. And friends, do you see how strongly here Jesus condemns this behavior?

Jesus is outrageous, isn't he? It would be better to meet with certain death in a cruel and painful fashion.

That would be better than to meet with God's righteous judgment for that kind of behavior. Better a millstone round your neck and a watery grave. Better that than to face God's judgment for leading others into sin.

[12 : 00] Better face that than God's judgment for being a cause of stumbling. Friends, hear the warning of these verses. Watch yourselves. Be warned by Jesus' righteous anger against those who attack his church, against those who cause these little ones to stumble.

Be warned. And yet, yet that's not the whole story of these two verses, is it? There's another facet here that we do well to observe alongside.

Because, because if you're an attacker, a cause of stumbling, then yes, these verses are a warning. But if you're among his disciples, if you are one of the little ones who might be caused to stumble, if that's you, then aren't these verses a tremendous reassurance?

We see here, too, don't we? We see Jesus' passionate protection of those he loves. For those who are his little children, he will go to great lengths to keep us safe.

Jesus is, to his followers, he is a protective parent. See, see to the boyfriend, a t-shirt that says, if you hurt my daughter, I can make your death look like an accident.

[13 : 21] To the boyfriend, that t-shirt's a warning, right? But isn't it also a reassurance to the daughter? A reassurance to know there are no lengths to which her father will not go to keep her safe from harm.

Isn't this what we're supposed to do as parents, to keep our children safe from harm? I mean, the t-shirt obviously goes to a comical extreme, but the principle is sound. Parents keep their children safe.

Friends, that is Christ's attitude to you. He is passionate about keeping you safe. He will take steps to keep you safe. He will punish those who threaten you.

He will guard you against harm. He offers warnings to those who might attack you and cause you to stumble or fall. My friends, he shed his blood for you.

Will he not also keep you safe? Will he not protect you henceforth? Friends, hear the comfort of these verses, not the warning only.

[14 : 29] So we hear the warning. We hear the promise. And then in the second half of today's passage, in verses 3 and 4, the instructions now here for you and me, these are more direct and

more pointed.

Rebuke one another. Forgive one another. Now, rebuke one another. Forgive one another. They sound, at first thought, they sound antithetical, don't they?

They sound like opposites. They sound like two completely opposed responses. Hard to see why at one time one should be at the same time ready to rebuke and ready to forgive.

I mean, the flow of thought from sin to forgiveness, that's perhaps a natural flow. And maybe we can see a natural flow into rebuke from a situation of sin, but why both rebuke and forgiveness?

Well, I think perhaps they sound like an odd pairing to us because we misunderstand the nature or misunderstand the purpose of rebuke.

[15:30] See, I think we're inclined to equate the idea of a rebuke, to equate it with a telling off, with chewing somebody out for bad behaviour. We make it like the shouty manager at work who always has that bee in his bonnet about something and wants to yell at his staff for every little thing that isn't exactly how he wants it to be.

I think that's what we kind of put under the heading of rebuke. But that's not the idea here, is it? Here in verse three, what's the objective of the rebuke?

What's the purpose of it? What's the end goal? It's not to make the wrongdoer feel small, is it? No, it's to bring them to repentance. The purpose of telling somebody that they've done wrong isn't so that they'll feel guilty.

The purpose is so that they won't do the same in future, so that they'll be guarded against future sin. It's the same concern as in the previous couple of verses, isn't it?

Guarded against future sin and repenting of present sin. That they will go and sin no more, that they will seek forgiveness from God and forgiveness from those they've wronged, in this case the one coming with the rebuke.

[16:41] The objective of the rebuke, the purpose of it is not to bring good to the one doing the rebuking. The purpose is the good of the one rebuked.

Yes, an apology might be nice, it might be proper for them to ask your forgiveness, but bringing to that point of asking your forgiveness, that can't be the primary motivation.

No, the motivation here is for the good of the one being rebuked, the rebukee, not the rebuquer.

Because if his sin is to him unnoticed, unregarded, if crucially he's not repentant for it, then he's in a dangerous place, isn't he?

see, like in those first couple of verses, we see again here, we see we are responsible for one another. We have an obligation to consider the impact of our actions upon others.

We have an obligation not to cause others to sin, and we have an obligation to call back the sinner, to rebuke him for his wrongdoing, in order that he might repent. This rebuke is an act of love.

[17:52] But it's not how we typically behave, is it? I don't know about you, actually I have a fair inkling, I suspect that our instinctive reaction to being told to rebuke somebody is, well maybe in a few cases a sort of gleeful delight in the opportunity to tell somebody off, or we've already seen that's a wrong response.

For more of us, I think our reaction to this call to rebuke someone is to say, oh no, I couldn't do that. I couldn't go and confront somebody. I couldn't go and tell somebody that they've sinned.

I wouldn't be able to go and say, that which you did was wrong, that that you did hurt me, oh no.

And so instead, well maybe we talk to a third party, we ask what should I do about X, Y, Z?

And because the person who you're asking doesn't know any better, well what you get is some sympathetic noises and not much more than that, and all that you've achieved is to gossip.

about somebody else's sin, isn't it? Because the answer to that question, what should I do about it, the answer to that question is clear. It's right here in Luke 17 verse 3.

[19:04] Go and rebuke him. It's plain in Matthew 18 as well. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. See again the purpose.

You win them over. You win them back. And Jesus in Matthew then lays out steps to follow if that process doesn't succeed. If the purpose of the rebuke is to win them over, friends, a rebuke is an act of love.

And if that's true, then to refuse to rebuke somebody is an unloving act. And it's also to refuse to do what Jesus has told you to do and therefore a sin on your own part.

This, by the way, is not a new idea in Jesus' teaching. This goes right back to the book of Leviticus. Leviticus 19 verse 17 says, Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in their guilt.

As far as the Old Testament is concerned, to fail to rebuke your neighbour, is to hate him in your heart. To fail to rebuke him is an act of hatred.

[20 : 20] Now, don't get carried away. Don't mishear this. This is not an excuse for an attack. Right? This isn't a justification for claiming to be pious as what you actually do is belittle and demean and abuse somebody else.

If this just call for godly rebuke, if this has been weaponised in your marriage or in your church relationships or your friendships, then that is a matter for your urgent repentance.

This is not an excuse to attack one another. But it is a command that we are called to obey. Do not hate your fellow Israelite.

Rather, rebuke him. I think maybe one way to guard against the weaponisation of the rebuke, one way to guard against it becoming an attack, is to see the second element here in these verses.

If they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, I repent, you must forgive them. As one commentator puts it, as much as Jesus is interested in correction, forgiveness.

[21 : 37] He is more interested in forgiveness, which knows no limits. Even seven times in a day, which is of course not a literal number so much as it is a number of completion, of perfection.

Unlimited forgiveness. Matthew 18, Jesus says not seven times, but 77 times. This clearly isn't a literal number, but rather forgiveness is to be habitual.

The benefit of the doubt is to be assumed. The emphasis is not, in Jesus' teaching as in traditional Jewish approaches, the emphasis is not on the penitent demonstrating sufficiently the genuineness of his repentance and then you might deign to forgive.

No, the emphasis is on the readiness of the heart to forgive. Now maybe this seems like a tall order. It's challenging, isn't it, to forgive one another.

sometimes we're inclined to wonder, is this really genuine repentance? Sometimes we're inclined to hold on to our hurt, sometimes we want the moral high ground that comes from being the grieved party.

[22 : 50] What do we do when that's how we feel? What do we do when it's hard to forgive? When we're not sure if it's genuine? When we want to hold on to our hurt, what do we do? Do we grit our teeth and say, well, Jesus says I have to.

Jesus said I have to forgive, so I guess I better do it then. There's worse ideas than that in the world, but I don't think that's ideal. I don't think that's Jesus' intention.

Not least because whilst that attitude might produce a kind of outward, surface-level forgiveness, it probably doesn't really reflect the state of your heart, does it? And that's what God's concerned with.

No, better than brute forcing forgiveness, better than that is to consider what you have been forgiven, isn't it? Better to remind yourself that you once stood beneath a debt you could never afford.

Better to reflect on the price that was paid on your behalf, the price that was paid for your sins. Better to remember that Christ's mercy is greater than your sin.

[23 : 55] Better to think on the parable of the unforgiving servant, with which Matthew 18 continues. Better to remember how much you have been forgiven.

How much you have been forgiven. The gravity of your sins against God. Better to remember that and on that basis to forgive the one who has sinned against you.

And so, if there's a thread that ties together these admittedly loosely connected verses, if there's a thread, I think it might not just be the logical shift from sin to forgiveness.

I think it's also in these verses a focus on the interrelatedness of our lives. Isn't there a common thread here of how we're called to care for one another?

To be diligent in avoiding leading one another into temptation. to be willing to rebuke when needed in order that the need for repentance might be apparent and to be ready to forgive in order that harmonious relationships might be restored.

[25 : 04] These, I think, are God's intentions for us. And too often, too often we're too spineless to rebuke and we're too resentful to forgive.

It should not be so. It is not God's intention for us. It is not the model that Christ modelled to us. It is not the example he set before us.

Friends, we need one another. The Christian life isn't meant to be lived solo. So let's care for one another as we seek, together, to follow the example of our Saviour and to live as he has called us. Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for challenging us from your word.

Thank you that you don't leave us wondering what your intentions are for us, but you make plain to us how you would have us live. Lord, we have heard difficult things from you this morning.

[26 : 13] We have heard challenges in your word. We've heard warnings of your judgment if we lead one another into sin. We've heard your command to be willing not only to forgive that perhaps we know and understand, but that command to rebuke as well.

Lord, we look at our hearts and we wonder how we could be pure enough to dare to rebuke one another. And yet we know that it is part of your good intentions for us, that it is part of your design. So, Lord, give us that willingness to do the difficult thing for the sake of the good of others, in order that sin might be seen and repented of, in order that your name might be glorified, in order that the availability of your forgiveness might be magnified, in order that we might praise you for your mercies, praise you that you are able to wash away sins of which we are increasingly conscious. Lord Jesus, thank you that your blood is sufficient to cover our failure to love one another as we should, as well as our failure in so many other ways.

Lord Jesus, thank you. Transform us, we ask. Amen. Amen.