

The Response of a Faithful Heart

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is taken from Luke chapter 17 verses 1 to 10.

And if you're following along in this kind of Bible that we usually have in church, it's on page 1055, Luke 17 verses 1 to 10.

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 round 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.

[1 : 15] 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 afterwards 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. Good morning, everyone. Lovely to see you both in here but also online.

Lovely to have people joining us online as well. Do please keep Luke's gospel open. Luke chapter 17, verses 1 to 10. This is the last talk in this section of Luke, which began back in Luke chapter 13, verse 22.

[2 : 16] So let me pray for us. Jesus says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful privilege we have of hearing your words this morning. And we pray that you would indeed grant us ears to hear. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Well, our issue today is that of culture, the kind of culture which, as a church, we should be seeking to cultivate.

It was the McPherson Report in 1999 which raised the whole question of the culture of institutions. The inquiry into the murder of the teenager Stephen Lawrence concluded that the investigation by the Metropolitan Police had been undermined by institutional racism and a failure of leadership.

More recently, questions have been raised about our political culture. Is it too male, too white and too privileged? Or the culture of the BBC?

[3 : 24] Is it too London, too liberal and too woke? Businesses try to reflect their culture by their advertising slogans. British Airways would like us to believe that it's reflected in that little slogan, to fly, to serve.

But what about the church?

Some of us, I guess, will know that the spotlight is currently on the culture of a number of churches and Christian organisations, both in this country and overseas. So what is it that should shape the culture of Greater Church Dulwich?

Well, in one word, it is the word repentance. Repentance has been at the very heart of this section, remember. It's the thing that brings joy to God.

Chapter 15, verse 10. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. And then last week, as we thought about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, repentance was the one thing, wasn't it, that the rich man realised he had failed to do?

[4 : 42] I don't know about you, but I think chapter 17, verses 1 to 10, at first sight it looks, doesn't it, that here is simply another kind of collection of sayings of Jesus that Luke has found.

And he's kind of got them like little sort of scraps of paper, if you can imagine them on his desk. And he's thinking to himself, ooh, I'm not quite sure where to put all this stuff, so I'll tell you what, I'll just kind of put them together and I'll just drop them here.

In fact, they follow very clearly from the parable. As if Jesus now, in verse 1, turns to his disciples and says that repentance should now be the thing which shapes your collective life together.

I think we're going to see that at one level the passage is a warning. It's a warning against the kind of fake religion of the Pharisees, the religious establishments.

But it also will show, I think, that a church shaped by repentance is a very wonderful and beautiful thing. After all, the church is often on the receiving end of pretty poor publicity.

[5 : 46] It's no wonder that many people's instinct is simply to think, why would I ever want to be part of a church? Indeed, that may well be your feeling this morning for one or two.

In which case, we're particularly glad that you're with us. And I hope that actually what we'll see is how very attractive a community shaped by repentance actually is.

Now, if you have sight of an outline, you'll see we've got three headings this morning. Firstly, repentance shaped relationships. Repentance shaped relationships.

Verses 1 to 4. And have a look firstly at verses 1 and 2. And Jesus said to his disciples, Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come.

It'd be better for him if the 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. Now, remember the context here is the Pharisees.

[6 : 52] Remember how back at the beginning of chapter 15, just turn to it in verses 1 and 2, they are horrified by the company the Lord Jesus keeps. We're told now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. And therefore, presumably the temptation that Jesus is talking about in our passage in chapter 17, verses 1 and 2, is the temptation not to repent and the temptation not to put your trust in him, or the temptation to walk away from Jesus, having begun to follow him.

And the warning is, verse 2, it's to those through whom those temptations come. I guess you don't have to look far, do you, to see that kind of attitude today.

Keeping people away from Jesus, preventing people from investigating the Christian faith, undermining the faith of Christian believers. It might be the threat to a Christian disciple from their extended family, perhaps from a Hindu or Muslim background.

You're bringing shame on our family. It may be the pressure from celebrity atheists or journalists not to be one of those foolish Christians, or perhaps the school teacher who belittles the faith of a Christian people.

[8 : 16] But then Jesus continues, 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. Now, as we look at these verses, I'd like us to imagine how very wonderful a church like this would be.

A church in which sin is rebuked and taken seriously, unlike the Pharisees who we saw a couple of weeks ago simply lower the bar, and rather than comparing themselves with God, instead they're happy simply to compare themselves with other people.

Oh, I'm not like them. In other words, Jesus is presenting before us a church in which people are quick to repent before God, but also quick to repent before each other.

Now, that kind of thing, it's just so unusual, isn't it, in our culture? And when it does happen, I guess we can almost be rather surprised by it. Just last week, Pascal Gozer, the referee in the England-Wales match, rugby match last weekend, he acknowledged that on two counts he had been wrong, that two contentious decisions that he had made in favour of Wales in the first half of the match had in fact been the wrong decisions.

[9 : 47] Now, I think he, I'm not sure, I may be wrong, I'm not sure if it was an apology, but it was certainly an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. That kind of thing is so rare in our public life, it just kind of leaps out of the headlines when you see it.

It's rare, of course, because only genuine repentance can shape relationships like this. Do you remember what the prodigal son said back in chapter 15, verses 18 and 19?

Just turn to have a look at it. As he said in chapter 15, verse 18, I'll arise and go to my father and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. In other words, if we know what it is to have humbled ourselves and turned to God in repentance for sins, if we have grasped the seriousness and weightiness of sin, such that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, then surely as we go on in the Christian life, we will be those, won't we, who take sin seriously.

When we see others sin, we won't simply think to ourselves, well, it's none of my business. Rather, out of love, we will rebuke them. Likewise, we will be quick to repent of our own sin.

[11 : 15] At which point we'll be willing to forgive and to go on forgiving, not just once, but seven times. Once more, it's only genuine repentance that can shape relationships like this.

Think again of the prodigal son and the father's welcome. As he says to the servants back in chapter 15, verse 22, but the father says to the servants, bring quickly the best robe, put it on him and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet.

A complete restoration to the position that he had within the family. That means, of course, that if we have repented, if we have put our trust in Jesus, we'll be quick to forgive others.

Conscious of our own sin, we'll be able to keep on forgiving again and again and again, again and again and again, seven times.

Just as God, in his kindness, keeps on forgiving us again and again and again. Unlike the Pharisees, who have such an exalted view of themselves and want nothing to do with those they regard as sinners.

[12 : 31] Can you see how repentance shapes church relationships and therefore the entire culture of a church?

The opposite, of course, is that we harbor grudges. We sulk. We'll try to settle scores. Or we simply ignore the situation and hope that it will go away.

A divided church. A church where ultimately sin isn't taken seriously. Some of us will be familiar with David Cook.

He's the former principal of the Sydney Missionary and Bible College. He's spoken at Word Live several times and he came here to Grace Church a number of years ago.

Now, his comment on these verses is that 80%, 80% of pastoral problems, pastoral issues in a local church would be avoided if churches took these words to heart.

[13 : 36] Isn't that striking? 80% of pastoral problems in a local church would be avoided. So, let me ask the obvious questions which flow out from this.

Is there someone you need to rebuke at church? Is there someone someone you need to say sorry to at church? Is there someone you need to forgive at Grace Church?

It's a reminder, isn't it, of how important real face-to-face relationships are. These are the kinds of things you can't do them online. You can't do them on social media.

I can only really rebuke someone face-to-face because, of course, that's the best way in which, at the same time, I can express my love and concern for them. I can only really repent face-to-face because that's the best way in which I can demonstrate my sorrow for sin.

And I can only really forgive face-to-face because that's the best way to demonstrate that the relationship has now been restored. I guess it's one of the things we're going to have to almost relearn over the next few months as we come out of COVID.

[14 : 48] of COVID, we're going to have to relearn how to do church face-to-face again, how to relate to each other face-to-face again.

Because real church is messy and real church will always be messy, in part because we're all messed up, sinful people.

Outwardly, of course, we don't necessarily look like that, and yet we know that inwardly we all are. We're messed up, sinful people. But also because, as Jesus says earlier on in this section, people will come into his kingdom from east and west and north and south.

Such a mixture of people he calls all sorts to be in his church. And therefore, there's plenty of opportunity to fall out with each other, to misunderstand each other.

As we rub up against each other, people we wouldn't normally rub up against. Christ. Now, it's just worth saying on this point, before we move on, that, of course, in a few moments or so, we are going to be sharing the Lord's Supper.

[15 : 54] And if we are conscious amongst ourselves of a broken relationship, then the Apostle Paul says, and I'll put 1 Corinthians 11, verses 27 to 29 there on the outline.

Don't look it up now, but do look it up later on if you would like to. The Apostle Paul says that we shouldn't be taking bread and wine. It may, of course, be that you've done, it may, of course, be the case that you've done all you can do to repair the relationship, in which case, feel free to take the bread and the wine.

But where sin in our own hearts is the issue, then we need to go and sort out the relationship first before we take bread and wine.

So, firstly, repentance-shaped relationships. Secondly, repentance-shaped service.

Service shaped by repentance. And let's look at this parable in verses 7 to 10. Verse 7. Verse 8. Will any of you who has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep say to him when he's come in from the fields, come at once and recline at table?

[17 : 10] Will he not rather say to him, prepare supper for me and dress properly and serve me while I eat and drink and afterwards 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 have commanded say, we are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty. Now, the parable makes the point that the disciple of Jesus Christ is never more than a servant of Jesus.

We are never anything more than a servant of Jesus. Now, of course, that is a very wonderful thing to be a servant of his. And yet I think it's easy to misread the parable as if Jesus is like a sort of ungrateful master whose servant's been working hard in the fields all day and then who expects him to carry on working when he comes home to cook the meal, to serve at table and so on.

And verse 9, he doesn't even get to get a thank you. So let's just flick back to Luke chapter 12 for a moment just so we don't misread the parable. And Luke chapter 12 verse 37.

This is how Jesus describes himself as the one who will serve his people in the new creation. And it is the most extraordinary verse.

[18 : 33] As Jesus says in Luke 12, 37, blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table and he will come and serve them.

Here is the heavenly banquet. And what is so truly extraordinary is that Jesus is the one who is serving his people. He is the servant king, the one who came to earth to die on the cross for our sins, who serves us in that way, but then carries on serving his people and he does so in the new creation.

The point, therefore, of our parable in Luke 17 is simply that the servant continues to serve.

Why? Because he's the servant. In the same way, perhaps, that if your water pipes burst and you phone up the plumber and the plumber gives you a quote and he comes and does the work and he finishes the work, you don't then invite him to stay on for lunch as well because he's done the job he's being paid to do.

He's done what was expected of him. And notice again that it's repentance that shapes this attitude of ongoing service of Jesus in the disciple.

[20 : 00] It's the very attitude actually, again, which the prodigal son had. Just look back to chapter 15 verses 18 and 19. As the prodigal son says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Treats me as one of your hired servants. Such a contrast to the fake religion of the Pharisees who are far more concerned with what other people think of them than they are with serving.

In contrast, the life of the genuine disciple is shaped by the humble, committed, costly, lifelong service of the Lord Jesus to us.

Just imagine for a moment in your mind's eye a church shaped by repentance as we all commit to serving the Lord Jesus together.

No sense of one-upmanship or competition. No sense of first and second class Christian. No in crowd as opposed to those who are on the edge.

[21 : 11] None simply attending without serving. Zealous to serve each other. Zealous to serve the Lord Jesus and to continue to serve the Lord Jesus.

Whether at church, in the workplace, with friends, and so on. And yet, of course, it may be a warning to some. Perhaps if we're beginning to demonstrate something of the attitude of the Pharisees.

Indeed, there have been a number of high-profile ministry failures, which I guess we'll all be aware of in the last two or three years. Steve Timmis at the Crowded House in Sheffield, Jonathan Fletcher in Wimbledon, Ravi Zacharias most recently from RZIM.

And while there are lots of details in terms of all three of those individuals, it seems to me that what they have in common is that they seem to have forgotten that they were only ever servants of the Lord Jesus.

They made the mistake of seeing ministry as a means of being served, as a means even of controlling other people rather than serving them.

[22 : 27] So we need to heed the warning. We need to look at our own hearts, I need to do that, we all need to do that. Do we come to church to be served by others or to serve?

If we have children, do we come for them to be served or do we come to serve other people's children? Service, of course, is the antidote to pride, thinking of myself more highly than others or looking down on others.

servants. And of course, it's the antidote, isn't it, to grumbling. I grumble when I've forgotten that a disciple is never more than a servant.

Yes, of course, we are unworthy servants. Just think for a moment of the opposite of unworthy. What would it be? Entitled. What an ugly thing that would be.

So how about you? At the great banquet in the new creation, the Lord Jesus himself will be serving us.

[23 : 39] Doesn't that inspire us to grasp every opportunity that we have to serve him? Thirdly, repentance driven by faith.

Verses 5 and 6. Repentance driven by faith. Have a look at verse 5. The apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith.

Now, it's not surprising, isn't it, is it, that they ask the question, the standard they're thinking is too high. Increase our faith. Now, the reason I structured the talk like this with verses 5 and 6 at the end is because it seems to me that verses 5 and 6 show us how it's possible to live the kind of repentance shaped life, the repentance shaped discipleship that the Lord Jesus is speaking about.

And the answer lies in verse 6. And the Lord said, if you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this marbury tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.

Notice in a nutshell what the Lord Jesus is saying. Not more faith, just faith. Can I say that again? Not more faith, just faith.

[25 : 05] In the first century, the mustard seed was one of the smallest seeds, the marbury tree one of the largest trees. I guess it's a reply, isn't it, that exposes perhaps one of the fundamental misunderstandings of faith.

But it's, we so quickly, I think, think it's about the amount of faith you have, rather than where your faith is placed. Perhaps you're not yet a Christian, perhaps you're looking in on the Christian faith, perhaps you think of a Christian friend, well, I wish I had your faith.

But faith in the Bible simply ever means trust, trust on the basis of evidence. It's not come some kind of mysterious force or spiritual power that some people have and others don't.

And it's certainly not the amount of faith you have, it is simply where your faith is placed. I think as Christians we can sometimes fall into the same kind of trap.

We can read a Christian biography or we can look at a Christian leader or we can look at a Christian who is particularly gifted and we can think to ourselves, well, yeah, I wish I had their faith. I think that kind of mindset can be so unhelpful because it can really hold us back.

[26 : 21] It can hold us back from serving others, it can hold us back from serving in a particular area of ministry, it can prevent us, I think, being front foot with the gospel, with friends and neighbors and colleagues.

No, it's not more faith, it is simply faith. here's a question if you want to ponder that a little bit further.

Imagine two people waiting in the departure lounge of an airport, both waiting for a flight, perhaps you've forgotten about flights and departure lounges, but just to try and picture it in your mind's eye, and they are both nervous flyers.

One of them is a six-year-old, never been on a plane before, the other one is an overweight adult. Who needs more faith that the plane will get to the destination?

The overweight adults? No. They need the same amount of faith. It's not about the amount of faith, is it? It's where their faith is. It's in the engines.

[27 : 31] It's in the laws of physics. We don't need more faith, just faith in Jesus. It's what I've tried hopefully to show throughout this talk by referencing the prodigal son, the person who has genuinely come to Jesus, who has genuinely come to Jesus in repentance of faith, Jesus is saying, will live like this.

Because real repentance is like a river rather than a pond. What's the difference between a river and a pond?

Well, the water that flows into the pond simply stays there. It stagnates. The water that flows into a river then moves on and is a blessing elsewhere.

It goes somewhere else. In the same way, repentance is not simply something which kind of marks the beginning of the Christian life and kind of just stays there, so to speak.

it is something which is then to be a blessing in every area of our Christian lives and shape our Christian lives and shape the culture of the local church and the way in which we function together.

[28 : 51] Jesus is very much putting the spotlight on our culture as a church, on our relationships as a church. He's saying to each of us, will you play your part in shaping the culture of Grace Church?

Let me lead us in prayer. The Lord says, 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.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your warm welcome, your arms open wide welcome to those who repent, who receive the forgiveness of sins, and who come back to you.

you. And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us as a church. We pray that repentance would indeed shape our relationships and would shape the way in which we serve, eager and zealous to keep on serving the Lord Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 28] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.