

How to Handle Sin in the Church

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[0 : 0 0] Now that's page 823 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there with me. Luke chapter 17, verses 1 through 10.

Let me read this passage for us. And he, that is Jesus, 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 apostle 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 : 1 9] 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. Let's pray together. Our Father, we ask that you would be present with us now as you've promised.

That by your spirit, you would bring the reality of your son, our living Lord, here into our midst. God, and that you would speak to us in a lively and active and effective way through your word.

Lord, help me as I expound this passage to do so faithfully. Lord Jesus, we want to hear your words, not the word of any person. Spirit, give us soft hearts and open ears and imaginations to know and to accept and to believe what it is you're telling us here.

[2 : 3 9] We ask all this in Christ's name, Father. Amen. Well, for the past few months, we've been walking through the central chapters of the Gospel of Luke, considering what it means to be a disciple, to be a follower of Jesus.

And it's clear here in Luke and across the New Testament that the life of discipleship isn't something that we're meant to do alone. We're meant to do this life together.

Believing is belonging, as the saying goes. But if you've been involved in Christian community for any length of time, you know that it is not a perfect place.

We disappoint each other. We frustrate each other. We even sin against each other. So what do we do with that? How do we deal with sin in the community of discipleship in the church?

One of my New Year's resolutions this year was to get out and go hiking more often, to actually go outside. So rather than actually do that, I've just been reading a lot on the Internet.

[3 : 49] So I've been reading up on... No, I'm kidding. We got out a little bit. So I've been reading up on trails in Connecticut and gear and how-to articles and all this. And again and again, I've run across the advice to pack a day pack with things like a flashlight and a compass and a whistle and a multi-tool and a first aid kit and matches.

And at first you think, geez, I'm only going for a day hike. Do I really need all that? And yet, if you're not prepared, you can get into some serious trouble, can't you?

The weather takes an unexpected turn. The trail isn't marked as clearly as it should be. You take a fall and get hurt. Bad things can and do happen, and it's best to be ready for it.

Doing life together in the church is a bit like that. If we're not prepared for the bad stuff to happen, if we don't know how to respond, then we're going to be in trouble. We need to know how to deal with sin in the church.

And that's exactly what Jesus is teaching us about here in Luke 17, 1 through 10. The audience in verse 1 is the disciples, his followers. And the topic, repeated again and again in the first four verses, is sin.

[5 : 10] Temptations to sin in verses 1 and 2. Interpersonal offenses, sins in verses 3 and 4. How do we handle that? How do we deal with it? And in short, Jesus here is teaching us three things.

He's saying that we should expect it, and we should rebuke it, and lastly, we should forgive it. How do we handle sin in the church?

This is Jesus' counsel. Expect it, rebuke it, and forgive it. So first, Jesus tells us to expect sin in the church. Look again at verse 1.

He says, temptations to sin are sure to come. Literally, the verse says, it is impossible for temptations to sin not to come. That's pretty strong language.

If you're looking at another version of Luke 17, or if you look down at the footnote of the ESV, you'll notice that the phrase temptations to sin is from the Greek word for stumbling block.

[6 : 12] In classical Greek, that word actually referred to the stick of a mousetrap that would trigger it. And then eventually, it sort of came to mean a snare, something that causes someone ruin, and hence, a stumbling block.

And here, Jesus means it spiritually, causing someone to stumble into sin. And what Jesus says here is that we should expect it.

It's going to happen. It is impossible for stumbling blocks, for temptations to sin not to come. There's going to be sin in the community. I wonder how many of us have a very naive view of the church, of Christian community.

We have a picture in our mind that everything is supposed to be hunky-dory. No problems, no offenses, no conflict. But Jesus wants to cure us of our naivete.

You see, we can often be under the illusion that the true church is a perfect church. And when we don't find a perfect church, we jump from fellowship to fellowship, only to be increasingly disillusioned.

[7 : 30] How many have stopped attending church altogether because the church has always fallen short of unrealistic expectations? Jesus is telling us here that every Christian community will inevitably be a flawed community.

But that doesn't necessarily make it a false community. What is the church after all? Not a collection of perfect people who have it all together, who just decide to spend an hour and a half together on Sunday mornings, so we can all parade how perfect we are.

The church is a gathering of sinners, friends, justified only by the grace of God in Christ. We have to expect that there will be imperfection and sin and personal offense that regularly surfaces as we do life together.

The question is, how do we deal with it? One thing is for sure, Jesus says we shouldn't just excuse it or think that it's no big deal. In verses 1 and 2 of our passage, Jesus is talking about causing other people to sin, to stumble.

And these are warnings that are repeated again and again in the New Testament. In Acts chapter 20, Paul warns the Ephesian elders that wolves would come in among the flock of the church and draw people away from Christ. In the New Testament letters and the rest of the New Testament, false teachers are constantly warned against leading others astray in what they teach, but also in how they live.

[8 : 55] The sort of things that they imply are okay and permissible by their own example. And here in Luke 17, Jesus pronounces a devastating woe on those through whom such temptations to sin would come.

This is probably one of the most graphic descriptions of punishment anywhere in the Gospels. A millstone in the ancient world would be shaped around a central hole that would sort of spin it.

And Jesus is saying it's better to have that giant rock as a collar dragging you down to the bottom of the ocean to drown than to suffer the punishment that's in store for those who would cause one of these little ones to sin.

Notice Jesus refers to the church with the loving and tender expression, little ones. He's not just referring to children here, he's talking about all believers.

God cares for the church with all the ferocious love of a mother bear protecting her cubs. Sin is not something to take lightly.

[10 : 09] Now verses 1 and 2 are particularly relevant for leaders and teachers in the church. Do the things that you teach, does the example that you set, in any way put a stumbling block in the way of one of God's beloved little ones in the church?

I think this applies to any of us who are in a position of spiritual influence. Whether it's an elder or a deacon, whether it's a small group leader, a youth or children's ministry volunteer, if you're a parent, even if you're just an older Christian friend, in all of these ways and more we're in positions of spiritual influence in other people's lives.

Are you, as Jesus says in verse 3, paying attention to yourself? Are you watching your life and your doctrine closely? As Paul will later say to Timothy.

So how do we handle sin in the church? Jesus says, don't be naive. Expect it. But don't excuse it. So if we're not meant to just excuse it, how then should we respond?

That brings us to verse 3. Jesus tells us not just to expect sin, but second, to rebuke it. Pay attention to yourselves, Jesus says. If your brother sins, rebuke him.

[11 : 29] The word rebuke means to speak seriously to someone. To confront and to correct them clearly and directly. Of course, there are all sorts of reasons why we don't do this, right?

On the one hand, we often function with this strange idea that being a Christian means constantly and incessantly being nice all the time. As if niceness were the tenth fruit of the Spirit, right?

But if we pause and reflect, underneath our incessant niceness is often just a desire to want to be liked, isn't it? If I actually correct someone, I risk them not liking me.

Or underneath the niceness is a desire to just want to stay comfortable. If I actually step out and rebuke someone, it's going to get messy and that's going to be inconvenient and I don't want to get mixed up in that.

Or underneath the niceness might be the false humility of thinking, who am I to point out someone else's fault? I've got so many of my own. But what Jesus is commanding us to do here is love each other enough to do something uncomfortable.

[12 : 51] To actually engage in what one writer called the awkwardness of redemptive correction. I love that phrase. It's from a book by Scott Sauls.

The awkwardness of redemptive correction. And he goes on to say that, you know, if we saw sin for what it really is, this cancerous lump in the human soul holding us back from our real purpose and joy that we're meant to have in Christ, would we be so willing to just look the other way and stay silent?

You know, if a doctor found a lump in the armpit of one of her patients and she said nothing, she'd be sued for malpractice. But how guilty, church, are we at times of spiritual malpractice by not speaking up when we see the destructive cancer of sin in a brother or sister?

Like when we hear a fellow Christian engaging in gossip. Or when we witness a fellow Christian speaking harshly to his children. Or when we notice a fellow Christian deliberately bending the truth to make themselves look just a little better.

But you know, often a loving rebuke isn't just hard because we want to be nice. It's often hard because the offense is personal.

[14 : 14] When someone sins against us personally, it's hard to correct them. Isn't it? But what exactly are the alternatives here? You see, friends, Jesus knows our hearts.

When someone actually wrongs you, it's impossible to do nothing. Jesus knows that we'll either harbor a grudge against that person or we'll criticize them behind our backs.

How much better to just follow the way of Jesus here, to lovingly rebuke and seek the restoration of the relationship rather than just ignore it and grow bitter against them.

I wonder, is there someone here in your church family that you need to talk to? Have you observed a clear area of sin in their life? Have they perhaps wronged you personally?

Jesus says, if your brother or sister sins, rebuke them. If you're unsure how to go about that, come talk to one of the elders. Let us help coach you in how you can best go about this awkward work of corrective redemption.

[15 : 32] The Bible points us to a number of helpful practices as we go about this work. Let me just briefly mention some of the main things to keep in mind before we move on to the next point. And these are from David Mathis' book, *The Habits of Grace*, in a chapter entitled, *Embrace the Blessing of Rebuke*.

First, he says, check your own heart. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to take the log out of our own eye and then we'll see clearly to take the speck out of our brother or sister's eye.

And when we do this, we'll approach the other person as a fellow combatant of sin and we won't approach them from a place of just judgmental pride. Second, seek to sympathize with the person.

Remember Jesus is teaching, whatever you wish others would do to you, do also to them. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Consider the manner in which you would want to be approached about the remaining sin in your life.

And that will help you go about correction with loving humility and not a spirit of condemnation. Third, pray for restoration.

[16 : 45] The goal of a godly rebuke is to restore the other person. So pray for that end. Pray for courage. Pray for the right words. Pray for a receptive spirit in the other person.

And even if they resist in the moment, pray that God would soften their heart to receive whatever in your observation is true, even if you get some of it wrong. Fourth, be quick.

The book of Hebrews says, exhort one another every day as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. The idea is don't wait forever to address the issue with the other person.

Be timely. Don't let that tiny bud of sin grow into a full-fledged weed. Fifth, be kind.

Paul says in Galatians 6, brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. In 2 Timothy, Paul will say, the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, while correcting his opponents again with gentleness.

[17 : 54] Remember that you're approaching a brother or sister for whom Christ has shed his own blood. If we're to approach our opponents with gentleness, according to 2 Timothy, how much more should we approach a brother or sister in Christ with gentleness?

Six, be clear and specific. Our kindness needs to be matched with clarity. How about the sin that we've observed? You know, before approaching someone with a corrective word, get it clear in your own mind what it is you've observed and how it may be harmful to them and to others.

You might even want to write out a few words or sentences on paper just to kind of help you be able to communicate it clearly and objectively. A corrective word is not going to be helpful unless it's specific and clear.

Seventh and last, follow up. If they receive the word of correction well, then follow up with a call or a conversation not too long afterward and commend the evidence of Christ in their life.

Remind them that you love them and you're excited to see what God's doing in their life. If they don't respond well, follow up by letting them know that you love them and you desire their good, that you're happy to be wrong if the correction was pretty subjective and that you're praying for them as they consider your observation.

[19 : 12] So there are some just general pointers to how to go about this work of rebuke. You know, I spent more time kind of going through that because we don't do this culturally.

We'd much rather snipe about someone on Twitter than actually talk to them face to face in love to actually restore them, right? If we had more time, we could talk about the other side of things.

How to receive a rebuke or a word of correction well. Well, briefly there, if someone corrects you, even if it feels like 90% of the rebuke is off the mark, look for the 10% that's on the mark and take it to heart as God's gracious work of redemption in your life because you know what?

Chances are a lot more than 10% is probably true. We all have sin that needs to be corrected. We need this daily, continual work of rebuke and correction in our lives.

Be grateful that someone was willing to actually love you enough to do it. But rebuking sin is only one half of the response that Jesus commands here.

[20 : 20] Dealing with sin in the church isn't just about expecting it or rebuking it. Lastly, Jesus says we must forgive it. Look back at verse 3. Pay attention to yourselves, Jesus says.

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 what does it mean to forgive? Earlier in Luke's gospel in chapter 7, Jesus uses the illustration of canceling a debt to describe forgiveness.

forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness is giving up the right to seek repayment from the one who harmed you to pay them back.

What does that look like? Well, it means that in our actions we refuse to hurt that other person directly, doing to them what they did to us or doing something maybe equivalent.

[21 : 25] But it also means that in our words we refuse to cut the person down in front of others, repaying them back by damaging their reputation a little bit.

But not just our actions and our words, it also means that in our hearts we refuse to indulge in ill will against them, imagining all those horrible things we'd like to happen to them because they wronged us.

And it means even in our prayers, instead of ignoring them or hoping for their pain, that we pray positively for their growth. And all this means that forgiveness also entails an openness to a restored relationship.

But I think I should point out here that what that openness to restoration looks like will look differently depending on the nature of the offense. Keep in mind, saying I forgive you doesn't necessarily mean I trust you.

Trust is something that has to be restored over time. And the speed at which that occurs depends on the behavior and the situation, right? Imagine you discovered that a close friend was taking personal things that you had shared with them and was gossiping about you to other people.

[22 : 48] Now, if you lovingly confronted this person and they repented, forgiveness would mean not paying that person back in all the ways we just described in your actions, in your words, in your thought life, even in your prayer life.

You would relinquish your rights to pay them back. You would release them from that debt and be open to a restored relationship. But forgiving that person doesn't mean you have to immediately trust that person.

Until a person shows evidence of true change, oftentimes you shouldn't necessarily trust them. In fact, to immediately retrust a person with sinful habits could actually be enabling them to sin.

So trust is going to take time. Reconciliation is going to take time. But in most cases, as trust is rebuilt, the relationship will slowly be restored.

And what all this means is that walking the road of forgiveness is one area where we especially need each other. If you've experienced a real wrong from another believer and you're wrestling with what forgiveness means, talk to a pastor or an elder or talk to an older, mature Christian.

[23 : 59] Don't try to just figure that out by yourself. Let others help you out on this journey. After all, forgiveness isn't necessarily a once-and-done event.

It is very much a process. And we need to walk with one another down that road. But as we come back to Luke 17, make no mistake about it, Jesus says that forgiveness, giving up our right to pay the other person back, is non-negotiable.

Of course, there are lots of reasons we could give for why forgiveness is a really good thing, right? It prevents bitterness from growing in our hearts. It stops a cycle of retaliation and paybacks and escalation of hurts and wrongs.

It repairs and it heals relationships that have been broken. All these things are good things. All that is wonderfully true. But friends, at the end of the day, followers of Christ must forgive for the simple reason that Jesus commands us to forgive.

There's no way around it. Jesus is telling his disciples that they must not only be vigilant to rebuke sin in a fellow believer, but even more than that, they must be just as vigilant to forgive sin in a fellow believer when they repent.

[25 : 25] In fact, the only thing worse than a church that doesn't rebuke sin is a church that doesn't forgive sin. And this forgiveness is to have no limit, no end point, even seven times in the same day.

radical, repeated forgiveness. This isn't an option. It's a command. You must forgive, Jesus says.

And to that, the apostles respond in verse five, Lord, increase our faith. It's sort of funny.

You know, I've read a lot of commentators on this passage and they're all sort of like, it just seems sort of like a string of pearls. How does it all fit together? And yet I'm thinking, if at the end of verse four you're not saying, Lord, increase our faith, something is wrong.

Seven times in the same day? Surely we don't have the spiritual muscle to lift that sort of weight. We're going to need a lot more faith to do that, Jesus. We don't have what it takes.

[26 : 33] You've felt that way, haven't you? Jesus says, you must forgive and your heart says, I can't do it. I don't have the faith to do it. But look at what Jesus says in response.

It is not the quantity of faith that matters here. It's merely the presence of faith. If you have even the tiniest seed of faith, you can do what you once thought was impossible.

because it had such a vast and tenacious root system, the mulberry tree was proverbial in Jesus' day for being particularly difficult to uproot.

There were actually some regulations in the Jewish Mishnah, which was sort of a collection of rules and regulations, that you weren't supposed to plant a mulberry tree within 75 feet of a cistern because they knew it would mess it all up.

But Jesus says, take a look at that gnarly, immovable thing with its roots stuck deep down in the earth, sort of like that wound, sort of like that hurt, sort of like that wrong that you've been bearing.

[27 : 45] You can't imagine how you would ever be able to dig that up and get rid of it. You don't think you have enough faith to actually forgive, but Jesus says, I'm not asking for heroic-sized faith.

I'm just asking that you trust me. One writer put it this way. He said, faith is like a window through which you can see something.

What matters is not whether the window is six inches high or six feet high. What matters is the God that your faith is looking out on. If it's the creator God, if it's the God incarnate and the person of Jesus, if it's the God living and active in the Holy Spirit, then the teeniest little peephole of a window will give you access to power like you've never dreamed.

You see, our deepest problem with forgiveness isn't that our faith is too small. Jesus can work with even the tiniest amount of faith, and that is good news. The problem isn't that our faith is too small.

The problem is that our pride is too big. Jesus tells a parable in verses seven through nine about a master and a servant.

[29 : 10] And the point is that the servant could never possibly, think about it, a servant could never possibly put in his debt the master just because he's done his duty, right?

And in the same way Jesus is saying we can never put God into our debt. We are unworthy servants who don't deserve God's favor and blessing.

You see, Jesus isn't asking you to be a superhero faith. He's calling you to be a servant in humility. Because the reality is, friends, forgiveness is nearly impossible if we think that God owes us something.

If God owes us something because of our good works, because of our long labors, because of our good life, because of our integrity, because of our fidelity, if we think that somehow all that earns some kind of purchase, some kind of bargaining chip, some kind of favor with God and puts God into our debt, there's always going to be a limit to what we think God can ask of us.

If all our plowing and keeping sheep and proverbial preparing of supper somehow means that God owes us something in return, there's always going to be able, we're always going to be able to draw the line and say this far but no further.

[30 : 33] And I guarantee you that forgiving those who have wronged us will more often than not always be the line that we draw. But if you know that you've been saved sheerly and wholly by grace without any contribution or any merit of your own, then everything changes.

if God has actually canceled our debt, staggering and boundless as it was, then how could we not turn and cancel the debt of others in return?

But you say, it's too costly, God, I can't do it. And yet, consider another servant, friend. And there was once a servant who owed us absolutely nothing, who was under absolutely no obligation and yet who freely came and did what was actually not his duty.

He came and actually performed the duty of another in their place. He was completely and utterly worthy and he performed the duty of the unworthy, you see.

Jesus on his road to Jerusalem here will eventually end up in the capital city and while there he'll be arrested and betrayed and he'll be stripped of his clothes and he'll be mocked and he'll be scorned and he'll be put to death.

[32 : 10] The Lord of all will become a servant. You see, friends, if you experience his grace, how can you not forgive?

forgive? Wouldn't the church be a strange place if we actually did this?

Think about it. What if we actually put into practice what Jesus teaches us here? What if people found the church to be a community of people who actually love one another enough to have hard and awkward conversations?

To correct each other in gentleness? To pursue righteousness and real repentance? Wouldn't that be so countercultural? And at the same time, it would be a community of people who love each other enough to forgive again and again and again.

And then, when people look on and say, how in the world do they do that? I mean, I get it. I get on the one hand being hyper-vigilant about righteousness and holiness, and I get on the other hand being forgiving, but to do them together?

[33 : 54] How in the world do they do that? And we would reply with genuine humility and gratitude and perhaps with a slight twinkle in our eye and say, you know, we're only unworthy servants.

We've only done what's our duty. And then they would say, oh, we could never do that. We don't have the strength to pull that off. And then we could say, if you had faith, even the size of a mustard seed in the God that we know in Jesus, you could uproot a forest and plant it in the sea.

Let's pray. Oh, Lord Jesus, what a healing and hard teaching you've given to us this morning.

Lord, we need your help. We need your help to not be disillusioned by sin in the church, and we need your help to be able to lovingly correct each other and have the courage to do that.

And Lord Jesus, above all, we need your help to be able to forgive one another. God, I'm sure that there are many of my brothers and sisters here this morning who are holding on to things, grudges and hurts and bitternesses.

[35 : 22] Lord, some here have been sinned against very seriously. And this call to forgiveness feels like a call to a little death. Oh, Lord Jesus, help us to see that because you have died, the extension from us of forgiveness to others can only mean life.

Give us the courage and the power by your spirit to obey you, Lord Jesus. Christ Phil, we pray this in your strong and holy name.

Amen. Amen. Yes.