

"The Problem of Being a Pretty Good Christian" Luke 17:1-10

I. In the Disciples' Shoes

Throughout this part of Luke, Jesus is teaching in order to strip us of any reliance on anything that could not save us. In chapter 16, He warned us against relying on comfort or labels or wonders as proof of God's favor; and He pointed us back to His saving Word instead. Now, our Lord seeks to strip us of yet another false god, one to which you and I are often tempted to bow: the god of our own works and merits. You would think that we should know better by now; and as the annual Reformation celebration draws near, you would think that we'd easily hold to the truth that we are saved by God's grace alone. But Old Adam doesn't give up easily; and as Jesus warns His disciples against trusting in their own works, He also warns you. So let's take a few minutes to work our way through the Gospel lesson, to see what Jesus says to His disciples; indeed, put yourself in their shoes as Jesus preaches His Law to them. The Lord tells His disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

It's a twofold announcement: If you offend someone by your witness/behavior, it's so serious a sin that it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea; and, Jesus tells His disciples, it's impossible that you won't offend. This will play out in the lives of the disciples. We could point to Peter, who denies Christ three times during the Passion, and who later must be rebuked by Paul for mixing works back into the Gospel (Gal. 2). We could certainly point to Judas who betrays the Lord; and we can look at the disciples as they hide in fear after the crucifixion—refusing to believe what Jesus taught them, refusing to believe the women who return from the empty tomb. Clearly, the disciples will be guilty of an offensive witness that could lead many astray. Clearly, according to Jesus, they will each earn a fate far worse than the millstone.

Jesus then tells them, "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4"And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." That's another tough bit of Law for the disciples. It's difficult enough to forgive someone once or twice when they've sinned against you; but seven times? In a day? Friendships are known to fall apart after one or two transgressions spread over weeks or months; the ability and desire to forgive an transgressor seven times a day is beyond what the disciples are able to muster.

The disciples apparently realize their shortcomings and take the consequences seriously, so they say to the Lord, "Increase our faith." With more faith, they'll be up to the task. They'll be able to live without offense. They'll be able to forgive. They just need more faith. Jesus replies, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." So, if the disciples had faith the size of a dinky mustard seed, they could do more than forgive and not offend: they could command a tree to uproot, move to the sea and replant itself, and the tree would have no choice but to obey. This leaves the two disciples with one of two conclusions. Either they don't have much faith at all, because they can't move trees by talking to them; or else they misunderstand what faith is for. We'll get back to that later. Those disciples are flesh and blood like everyone else, so Jesus seeks to strip them of any trust in themselves. Where they've thought they were doing a pretty good job at toeing the line, forgiving and being faithful, He tells them that they haven't come even close. And now, He delivers the knockout punch: "And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.

So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

Now, that's a blow. Let's say, for argument's sake, that the disciples are to excel. Let's say that they live lives in which they give no offense, and that they forgive everyone no matter how much they've been hurt. Let's say that they make proper use of faith and even move a mulberry tree to the sea. It's not going to happen, but let's just say it does. Let's just say that the disciples actually keep this Law. What then? Do they deserve extra praise from the Lord for going above and beyond the call of duty?

Is the Lord especially pleased that they've done such an excellent job? No. If the disciples do everything that they're supposed to—if they've kept every last bit of the Law, then—finally!— they've only done what they were supposed to be doing all along. They've only made it to the level of unworthy servants. They've finally turned in a satisfactory performance.

Do you see what Jesus tells His disciples? To them, pure and holy obedience of God's Law is so impossible that any improvement must count for something. When someone is doing better than they were before, the Lord must be impressed. But Jesus says otherwise: When someone keeps all of God's Law, they've finally done the minimum of what God told them to do all along. That's a tough standard: Perfection is satisfactory, and nothing less comes close. Everything else merits worse than the millstone. Is there hope for the disciples? Yes. We will return to that in a bit.

II. Pretty Good Christianity and the Perfect Christ

You and I expect people to do their jobs. You expect the newspaper at the front door before breakfast. When it's there, you don't call up the paperboy to say thanks; but if it's missing, you're far more likely to call the paper dispatcher. Police officers do not take the time to thank citizens for obeying the law; if they pull you over, it's probably because you've done something wrong. Do you get the idea? When people do what they're supposed to do, that doesn't merit extra praise or a party. They're doing their duty. You and I have jobs to do, different vocations that the Lord gives to us: employee, boss, parent, child, husband, wife, student, teacher, congregational member, citizen, etc. With each of those vocations comes a set of requirements, expectations, things to do—a lot of requirements, a lot of expectations, and a lot of things to do. And frankly, even though we expect other people just to do their duty, we sure don't mind some recognition and appreciation for all that we do. That's why we have so many appreciation days throughout the year for mothers, fathers, grandparents, bosses, teachers, secretaries, etc.; well, that and to give the greeting card industry a shot in the arm. No matter how imperfectly we do our daily tasks, we expect some recognition for what we do.

This, of course, is the opposite of how it's supposed to be. Were it not for sin, we would happily thank everyone else for doing whatever they do, and not worry whether we receive any recognition or not. In the great scheme of things, the appreciation—or lack thereof—that we show for one another is a little thing. But here's where the rubber meets the road—our job performance before the Lord. When we figure we've done a pretty good job of being a Christian, we expect that that meets with His approval. If we've done a little bit better at keeping the rules, we expect the Lord to take note of our success.

The Lord warned His disciples against bringing offense. As a Christian, you are called to live a life that serves as a witness of God's goodness and mercy; **any** sin that you commit, then, has the potential of giving a bad witness, of scandalizing those who see it. **Any** sin has the potential of causing offense to others; and already it is an offense before God. So, do you ever grow impatient? Angry? Are you ever caught looking at something you're not supposed to—doing something that you shouldn't be doing? Do you ever partake in off-color humor with your buddies, just to fit in? Ever nod approvingly at some

sort of gossip or prejudice that's getting said? All of this brings offense, and could cause an observer to stumble. Therefore, the Lord says, for such sins it would be better for you to have a millstone around your neck and an undersea voyage. Now, note this: Jesus doesn't say that, if you offend less, that you'll get a smaller millstone and a chance to resurface. You're either sinless or you're not, and pretty good isn't good enough. In fact, if you give a life of perfect witness where you cause no sinful offense to anyone, what does it mean? It means that you've finally done what you were supposed to be doing all along. It means no millstone; but it also means no special achievement, either. In fact, you've finally qualified to be called an unworthy servant, nothing more.

The Lord warned His disciples to forgive, even forgive the same sinner seven times in a day. Thanks to that sinful nature, you and I are not prone to forgive in the first place. We bear grudges easily enough, and it's pretty natural for us to remember the sin and use it to our advantage later on. Forgiveness doesn't come naturally, and we often mouth words of forgiveness even while we still resent the sin. Now, imagine someone sinning against you not once, but seven times in a day! Each time, they say they're sorry, and so the Lord requires you to forgive them each time. Now, we're tempted to frustration, to throw up our hands and say, "Lord, I forgave Him twice! What more do you want?" The Lord responds, "Forgive him seven times, or seventy times seven and more if necessary. And remember: if you do forgive him all those time, it doesn't make you a super Christian. It means that you've finally done what you were supposed to be doing all along. You've reached the level of unworthy servant, nothing more."

Do you see what the Lord tells us here? His Law demands the impossible, obedience that we cannot do. And if we did the impossible, it wouldn't be anything special. It would only be our duty. No wonder the disciples said, "Increase our faith!" So we should also pray. But be careful here, too, because so many misunderstand faith. Sadly, many teach that faith is something that enables you to do whatever miracles you desire, and that as your faith increases you can actually stop sinning in this life. But if that's the case, then faith is something that teaches you to rely on you, not Christ—as long as you believe enough in Jesus, you can use His power to do what you want. Maybe you can actually be perfect, show yourself to be a worthy servant before God.

But all of that's wrong. It misunderstands faith in a way that takes focus off of Christ and puts it onto you. When that happens, you're a most unworthy servant indeed. After all, we mentioned that, throughout these Gospel lessons, Jesus is doing His best to strip from you any sort of hope that would fail you, so that you might trust in Him alone. The faith He gives isn't going to do the opposite and teach us to trust in our works and power of believing. Properly understood, faith is God's gift to you, and faith is what believes the Word and all the promises of God. And it is by this faith, dear friends, that you are delivered from the millstone around the neck and everlasting condemnation.

For one thing, faith believes what God says about His Law and the consequences of breaking it. It's Old Adam who says, "I'll show God that I'm good enough." Faith, on the other hand, acknowledges the brutal truth. By faith, we confess, "I am a sinner, for I have failed to keep God's Law. For that, I deserve everlasting condemnation. Even if I kept God's Law perfectly, I would only be doing what was expected of me; therefore, my far-from-perfect works do nothing to save me." In other words, faith acknowledges the truth that we are sinful and need a Savior, as Scripture declares. And now, your faith delights to hear what the Bible says about your Savior, Jesus Christ; because it is your Savior who feeds and increases your faith by His Word. Hear this Gospel now, that your faith might be strengthened.

Jesus was the worthy Servant for you. As the Son of God become flesh, He kept God's Law and obeyed His Father's will perfectly, without sin. He did this for you, living a perfect life in order to make up for your sins, to credit you with His perfect obedience. Therefore He was worthy—not just of appreciation, but of all glory, honor and praise. Faith trusts and rejoices that Jesus became flesh and

lived a perfect life for you. The worthy Servant became the suffering Servant for the sins of the world. Rather than hang the millstone around your neck for your sins and offenses, God the Father hung that weight of sin on the shoulders of His Son as His Son was hung upon the cross. Because Jesus took your guilt and suffered your sin, He now declares you "not guilty," forgiven. And because He is the Lamb who was slain, He is worthy of more than recognition for His holiness. He is worthy of all power, riches, honor, wisdom, strength, glory and blessing (Rev. 5:12).

The Lord doesn't stop there. Risen again from the dead, He comes to you to increase your faith. Remember His story in the text, where he speaks of the master who rightly expects his servant to serve him a meal. According to the Law of God, you're less than an unworthy servant. Even if you do not sin, you've only done your duty. That would make you an unworthy servant, and a servant still. You haven't earned the right to sit at the table while your master waits upon you. However, according to the Gospel, that's exactly what Jesus does! He welcomes you to His Supper and feeds you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins—why? To increase your faith by His grace, that you might always trust in Him. According to the Law of God, you're less than an unworthy servant who deserves no special treatment. According to His Gospel, you're far more than a servant. You are His beloved child whom He will feed and nurture now and forever.

That's what our Lord calls us to, and that is what He gives. Therefore, we give thanks for the vocations and tasks that the Lord entrusts to us. But while we give thanks for them, we also recognize that they promise no salvation, for we daily sin much and fail to be worthy servants. Our unworthy works cannot save us. Instead, we rejoice in the grace of our Savior, for in Him alone is our salvation. The Son of God became flesh and became the worthy, suffering Servant who has redeemed us by His blood. And although He now lives and reigns over all things, He remains the Servant who seats you at His table to forgive you and strengthen your faith. Rejoice this day! Solely by the worthy labors of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen