

Humble Greatness

Luke 17:1-10

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 18:4

Introduction:

This last week I had to opportunity to travel back to Atlanta for our semi-annual (or bi-annual - I've heard it both ways) meetings with Encompass World Partners board, the mission sending agency we work primarily with, including David and Melody. We get together to strategize, pray, go over budgets, pray, get updates on field activities and pray. Travelling gives me an opportunity to get out of the mundane, to gain new perspective, and interact with people smarter than me, though that could easily be argued that I do that every day around here. Flying cross country is a bit like going to Disneyland without the happiness, churros, feigned good attitudes, and joy. People in the airport act calm and nice until their zone is called to get on the plane, when it turns into trying to get onto the last chopper out of Vietnam! I find myself quietly turning into the ethics police, as people have sly ways to cut their way in line, which I tend to use my luggage and size to dissuade them from their plans (and don't get me started on trying to get on a Van Nuys flyaway bus on Friday night - if anyone doubted the depravity of man, just watch what people are willing to do to get home 10 minutes earlier).

Gathered with the mass of humanity, the question kept coming back to my mind: how many of these folks around me are followers of Christ? How many are truly saved? How would I know? Would they think I am? Is it because I try to act nice to people, smile at them, being courteous and respectful? Certainly there is an **ethical component** to our discipleship, that we should *act* differently than the world, but what types of actions are truly distinctive? It is this last question that I want to wrestle with this morning together.

This is the essence of what Jesus was impressing on His disciples on His final journey to Jerusalem to die. He wanted to make the distinctions between what the religious leaders of the day taught, believed, and practiced to be blatant in their powerlessness to accomplish what they claimed: to please God. Followers of Jesus were to be set apart, not simply from the world, but from the false religions who tried all they could to make themselves acceptable to God. It was clear that what would NOT distinguish them: **keeping the law in an external way**. The Pharisees had a corner on that part. No, the distinction was one of internal change, one that only could be given and produced by God, through His grace, to bring **faith**, an overwhelming trust in God rather than self, and newfound **humility**, which saw oneself in light of God. When these internal and mindset changes took place, disciples would be known by their actions **far greater than simple everyday ethics** (although those matter too). Jesus gave **3 distinctive qualities for His followers that differentiate them from the Pharisees and the world**.

In a similar discourse in Matthew 18 (Jesus would have taught similar things multiple times in His travels), He told His disciples who were arguing about their own greatness the true secret: **humility**. Each of these qualities have to do with humility, in order for us to truly love each other, to live in dependent faith, and to embrace the mindset of a servant.

Humility Needed for Loving Relationships (Luke 17:1-4)

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 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."

Before digging into this hard (by implication) text, there are two fundamental issues at play: **1)** As disciples of Jesus we share a common commitment to pursue righteousness and holiness. A person who claims to love God and yet has no desire to obey nor a care to change is NOT a true follower; **2)** We are not to pursue holiness and righteousness in isolation, but rather we are to walk together. This not only provides encouragement but also **mirrors**, where our heart is exposed in the interaction with others. We not only get to serve each other, we grow by dealing with each other's sin, resolving conflict, and learning to love.

The core sentence is the command between two commands: **pay attention to yourselves**. They were to give careful attention, to beware about what they teach others and how they deal with sin. Relationships have the opportunity to bring out the best in us, but also the propensity to reveal the worst.

Humble care not to lead anyone into sin

Jesus gave two overarching realities of temptations around us: **1) they will always be there, 2) they better not come from us.**

The word for temptation here is the word for **stumbling block** or **the bait stick in a trap**. The world is full of these, built on lies that try to deceive us into thinking that God is not enough, that happiness is found somewhere else, and that sin will satisfy. It is clear that these temptations are effective because they appeal to our own sinful desire already IN us (James 1:14). Temptations are around us every day, scheming to get us to believe that private sin is ok, that we can keep our idols, and that there are places in our lives that we can keep hidden for ourselves. The fact that there are temptations DO NOT give us the green light to sin, but that if we sin, we have an advocate with Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who paid for our sin (1 John 2:1-2)

The second reality is **how, or by whom**, the temptations come. Since these temptations can come through people, both by teaching and other influence, followers of Jesus are to make sure that they are not the instrument of temptation. Note He used the term "little ones" here. This is not a reference to kids but rather to those who are fellow believers (Matt. 18:5-6). If we are the reason, the conduit by which other believers stumble into sin, it would be better to tie a millstone, the heavy stone used to roll over grain to separate wheat from chaff, around our neck and drown ourselves. Drowning is perhaps one of my least favorable choices of death, and this would be **better** than causing a believer to sin.

This is exactly what the Pharisees had been doing with the nation. By their teaching and lifestyle they caused people to move away from Jesus toward their own righteousness. But the caution should not be lost on us. How do we interact with each other? Are we confident that we teach the truth properly and do not encourage others to violate their consciences? Perhaps the best application of this is how we train our kids at home. Are we teaching them the truth about the world, life, and following Jesus? If they followed our example would it result in pursuing idols or becoming more like Jesus. This is something we must pay attention to.

Humble connection to rebuke a brother

Not only are we called not to **lead others into sin, we actually are called to lead people OUT of it**. The first way we do this is to **rebuke or admonish a fellow believer**. Here Luke gives a principle of dealing with sin, where Matthew gave a **process** of how it is supposed to happen. This is not being judgmental

nor is it being nitpicky toward people. It is a necessary result of being close together in relationships where sin will come out, often against each other. A few principles on rebuking each other:

- **The goal is to win a brother (Matt. 18:15)** - This reminds that the purpose of confronting each others sin is to be restored, both to God and each other. Sin steals joy, creates an ability to truly worship, and breaks fellowship with each other.
- **The process is to start in private FIRST (Matt. 18:15)** - Instead of talking **about** people's sin, we should instead talk **to** them about it. This keeps us from gossip, slander, and selfish attitudes. The process goes on when there is no repentance, but it should ALWAYS start with a one to one, private interaction. That means we all must commit to sending people to talk to the person they are telling us about. Too often we are aware of a habitual sin of someone and talk to others rather than addressing them directly.
- **We only rebuke what is clearly seen and stands written (1 Cor. 4:1-6)** - The sin being addressed must be one that is clearly seen, breaks a clear Biblical command, and is not changing. This means that we CANNOT judge the intentions of the heart that only God will disclose one day to all of us. The sins being addressed here in Luke are the willful, habitual and premeditated sins that have become unchanged patterns.
- **We remember that love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8; Prov. 10:12; 1 Cor. 13:5)** - This means that there are many sins with each other that love covers. Does that mean we are soft on sin? It means we are careful and cautions in our rebuke. This keeps us from perpetually confronting each other, knowing that we are consistently sinning. Think about **your marriage**. What sins do we choose to cover? There are times I may act out of selfishness, laziness, or pride, and Erin will cover those, loving me through them. The hope is that we are each working on pursuing Christ and will deal with these on our own in an ongoing way.
- **We look to ourselves at the same time (Galatians 6:1)** - Rebuke should again act as a mirror as we look to ourselves FIRST before we look to anyone else. This is a humble and realistic look that reminds us we are prone to EVERY sin, even the one we are rebuking.

Again, we rebuke or admonish out of love, exercising wisdom when to address and when to cover. But rebuke, or leading someone out of sin, MUST BE MATCHED with a quick, sure, and consistent willingness to forgive to be truly effective.

Humble conviction to truly forgive

Perhaps one of the hardest by implication passages in all of Luke. We have been inundated in a culture that is so **easily offended** that we begin to believe that we deserve ease and comfort, miffed if someone has the audacity to disagree with us or live differently. There is such an upswing in litigation that not only are we allowed to **sue for anything** and **ACTUALLY WIN**, but we have created an unsustainable cultural reality where any death or pain in the hospital is the doctors fault (should be sued), any arrest is the police officers fault (should be sued), and any trip in the foyer of a building is the builders, owners, and janitors faults (and they ALL should be sued). This comes out of an unbiblical view of **self**, truly believing life is about us, that others are there to serve us, and anyone who is contrary to that is wrong (and probably should be sued).

That is why this command is the epitome of counter cultural thought. Perhaps we can get people on board with rebuking each other, but the idea of **forgiveness leaves us wanting and confused**.

Forgiveness is the choice to remember a sin no more, to hold a sin against another no more. This is not a "forget about it" decision, but one that says I will not hold this sin against you by not making you pay for it anymore. It releases the person forgiven from **earning** their standing with us, and stops

waiting for a "pound of flesh" being given. Forgiveness is a transaction that can happen in the moment, and is the foundation for things like rebuilding trust, respect, and leadership, which are also choices but take time to rebuild.

In the parallel teaching of Matthew 18, Peter asked the question "How often should I forgive my brother", which if we are honest, that is **THE question we ask**. Once, ok. Twice, you're stretching it. **7 times in a day, or seventy times seven** like He told Peter! Now you've lost me. Doesn't this mean the person is really not repentant? Doesn't this embolden a sinner? Am I just being taken advantage of? These are good questions that Jesus does not address. He simply says we are to **consistently forgive** so that we can be made whole, restored, and reconciled. A few principles to keep in mind:

- **We forgive just like God forgave us (Eph. 4:32)** - We must first recognize our own sin and how God forgave it - "Just as God in Christ forgave us" - God forgave us by getting His pound of flesh in Christ. In other words, the payment for anyone's sin was paid by Christ. If we are waiting for someone to FEEL how bad their sin was, to FEEL how it affected us, and we want to help them feel it, we misunderstand forgiveness. Jesus paid it all, the debt and the shame, so we can now freely forgive someone else.
- **God is Offended by sin much more than we ever should be (Psalm 51)** - David recognized that his sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, the people of Israel, and his family was truly a sin against God and God alone. Every sin committed is offensive to God, and yet He continues to shower grace upon grace on us.
- **I have been forgiven an unpayable debt (Matt. 18:23-35)** - The parable is told by Jesus of a man who owed a greater debt than could be paid in a lifetime (10,000 talents, each one which was 20 years wages for a common laborer). He was forgiven of his debt, and he turned around and put someone who owed him 3 months pay into prison until he could pay. He received mercy but did not give it, so that mercy was taken away. **Mercy is not giving someone something they deserve.** God has mercy on us every time that we sin, and He is relentless.
- **When I fail to forgive, God will not forgive me (Matt. 6:14-15)**
- **Lack of forgiveness is a sign that we fail to love - either God or others (Luke 7:47)** - Forgiveness recognizes God's love for us, and when we forgive others, it shows we understand love.
- **We leave the judgment of sin up to God (Rom. 12:19)** - It is God's job and right to judge, condemn, and pour out wrath, not us.

None of this easy, as the disciples agreed. But that does not mean this is not clear. So who are you withholding forgiveness from? Are you holding onto bitterness and anger because you cannot bring yourself to forgive? It does not seem fair, since the offending party seems to get off too easily. But this lack of forgiveness will destroy us, not them. That's why Jesus said in **Mark 11:25** - "*And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.*" This means that there can be forgiveness given even when one does not repent so that our prayers are not hindered by anger. **Humility is imperative here, along with God grace to believe and a response from love.** Being a people who are quick to forgive are a **distinctive group**, those who keep short accounts and work toward loving and trusting. But Jesus' apostles verbalized what we are feeling right now.

Humility Needed for Dependency (Luke 17:5-6)

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.

Humble to recognize our weakness

The apostles, those sent out by Jesus who had followed Him closely and fervently, were reeling from this teaching and could only blurt out, "**Increase our faith!**" Do you ever feel like that? The call to follow Jesus is the call to die, the call to turn from self to trust Him, to discontinue living for this world. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and refuse to take vengeance in our own hands. In other words, the call to follow Christ is **IMPOSSIBLE apart from faith**. On top of this, faith itself cannot be conjured up by ourselves but must be given by the gracious hand of God, making us dependent on Him for even that. We are consistently, everyday, weak in our own strength to fulfill what we are called to do. So the distinctive we are called to is admit and embrace the weakness, calling God to increase what He Himself has given.

Humble to ask for greater faith

Now notice what Jesus reminded them. They did not need MORE faith, by quantity, since even the smallest of faith, like that of a mustard seed could make a deeply rooted tree to rip out of the ground. In other words, the disciples were NOT lacking enough faith given by God's grace, they simply needed to exercise the faith that had already been given to them. The disciples did what we often do, "**I can't do that!**" I can do a lot of different things, but I cannot do _____. This is not about "can't", its about "won't". The way to grow, or increase, in faith is to exercise the earth shaking faith that has already been given to every believer. When we make truth informed, faith driven decisions each day, regardless of the discomfort or temporary pain, we grow in our ability to trust the Lord implicitly, whole-heartedly, and joyfully.

Humility Needed for Self Recognition (Luke 17:7-10)

"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.'"

Humble to see our function as a servant

This brought Jesus to the final point of his long discourse, and he ended with a summation of the need for humility. Pride is so deceptive. Pride puts qualifications over the commands of God (I will do this only *if* _____), convinces ourselves that everyone else is wrong, and deceives us into thinking we are better than we are. So He told a story of a servant and owner to illustrate the function and mindset needed for a faith driven, forgiveness offering, willingly rebuking, and stumbling avoiding disciple. A servant worked in the field all day, every day. Each day he would work hard from sun up to sun down. At the end of the day he would enter back into the house and would be greeted with the familiar response, "**you stink! Go and change your clothes because I can't eat with that stench in my nostrils. Change so that you can serve me my dinner. When I am done, and only when I'm done, can you eat your dinner.**" No thanks given, no acknowledgement of work done, and no expectation that anything would change tomorrow.

This is our life. "**So you also...**" was Jesus summation of identity. We are servants. Specifically, we are HIS SERVANTS. We serve, following His commands because He has bought us, purchasing us with His blood, and He owns our life. In this life, we are not looking for acclaim or praise, but by faith believe that **WILL COME** (well done, good and faithful servant - Matt. 25:21). But as for today, we serve for the joy of honoring our King. We serve without expectation of reward today, even thanks. How often are

we upset when we do something and NO ONE EVEN THANKS US. For a counter-cultural follower of Jesus, we are not seeking the temporal reward but the eternal one.

Humble to keep the mindset of a servant

But Jesus goes on to say that we not only serve, we do so because we are **unworthy servants**, doing only what we ought to have done. Notice that Jesus calls out our position, who we are, and by doing so calls out our identity. An **unworthy servant is WHO WE ARE, and that is who we are in this life!** We never outgrow this status, but by faith we embrace it more and more, causing greater joy and effectiveness. Our life is a perpetual result of God's lavish love, grace, and mercy. We are not seeking honor and praise in this life, knowing that we will dine with the King in the future. When we embrace this mindset, forgiveness becomes possible. We care about others in a way that goes beyond what they can do for us. We are not easily offended because we know what we truly deserve. We are quick to love, quick to give grace, quick to cover an offense, and quick to grant mercy. This is distinctive living from a distinctive gospel.

So here we are confronted in our pride. Are we living in such a way that causes people to sin around us? Are we humble enough to call out someone else's sin? Have we forgiven those who have sinned against us? Have we adopted the mindset of a servant? Or to ask it another way: are we living in humble greatness, a distinct life by faith, following Jesus?