

Reasonable Service
By Jason Huff
Psalm 72:1-14, 1 Peter 4:8-11, Luke 17:1-10

This week's third Scripture reading is from Luke 17:1-10. Listen now to God's Word. "Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." The apostles 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 had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would 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.'""

Every semester I attended school, I remember the first day of classes. There were new faces, new teachers, new books, and if you were lucky, old friends. But the moment of truth came down to seeing the syllabus, that document that held in its pages everything you needed to know to pass that subject. A good syllabus outlines expectations. Sometimes, teachers were levelheaded in what they wanted; other times, we all looked at the syllabus with disbelief. But either way, we knew what we had to do.

If we think about it, knowing what's expected of us is a hallmark of job satisfaction. When you know what your job is and what numbers you have to hit and how you might be rewarded for great work, you put more effort into it. Basic expectations are what keep our society running. We expect that we will be civil towards one another, that we won't steal each other's stuff or meddle in each other's business. We expect that if someone wants to be our friend, they'll call from time to time. Expectations are a good thing.

In this passage, Jesus talks with His disciples about basic requirements for entering the Kingdom of God. He's establishing the minimums expected from His disciples, the attitudes that are a baseline for all true believers. This isn't the extent of them or even perhaps the most important of them, but they are traits that all believers will share. Jesus establishes these three as devotion, forgiveness, and faith. These are the requirements of reasonable service.

The first is devotion, and what I mean by devotion is a commitment not to stray from God or lead others astray but to stay committed to Him. Last week, Jesus showed that the Pharisees were pretenders. They claimed that they were righteous, but they justified themselves before men. They argued about the letter of the law while they broke its intention. They were devoted to money and power and esteem rather than God's approval. But what was most problematic was that the Pharisees had set themselves up as the spiritual leaders in the community. They were themselves leading people astray from the truths that Jesus was teaching.

The wording in the first part of this passage is difficult to translate. The term “cause to sin” in the Greek is *skandalon*, which is an obstacle or stumbling block; it’s the root of our word “scandal.” We are to avoid being a stumbling block to others at all costs. Now this passage states that it is inevitable that stumbling blocks will come – it’s not so much about avoiding temptation as it is warning us not to lose our devotion and, in the process, causing others to stumble. It warns us that some will lead people astray from salvation; they’ll claim to be godly yet follow their own desires and teach falsehoods about God through their words and actions.

At first, this doesn’t seem like such a big deal. Most of us feel we’re devoted to God. We aren’t intentionally leading anyone into sin. We aren’t like the big-time religious figure who leaves his wife for his mistress and brings public disgrace to Jesus. We aren’t like the preachers who have mansions and yet fail to take care of the poor. But it’s our unwillingness to be Christ-like in the small things that betrays us. How many of us have been discouraged when someone who claims to be a Christian badmouths another believer? How many of us have seen folks in church on Sunday swearing at their employees on Monday? How many of us have remained silent when someone denies the truthfulness of the Bible or sin or hell or any number of the teachings of the faith? Have *we* ever been the guilty party in those scenarios? Most people who hate the church don’t hate it because of a crook on TV a thousand miles away. They hate it because of people next door who call themselves Christians who’ve failed to be Christ-like to them, who’ve become a stumbling block by failing to live out God’s truth in their midst.

This changes our perspective. If it’s better for someone to die at the bottom of the sea than to lead others away from faith and into sin, then we need to be careful how we live. When we claim Jesus as our savior, people start watching to see if we’re truly devoted, or if we’re just pretending too. Paul and Peter encouraged members of the church to live quiet, graceful lives that garner respect from those outside the faith. This means that sometimes we will have to proclaim the truth in places where we will lose respect. Other times, it will mean that we will have to be graceful when every fiber of our being tells us to judge. As 1 Peter 2:12 puts it, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

The second requirement is forgiveness. If we see limits on forgiveness in this passage, we aren’t reading it the right way. When Jesus uses seven as a number, he’s using it in a very Jewish way, as the number of perfection. If you forgive someone seven times in a single day, it means that there is no limit to the forgiveness available to the person who repents. There are actually two parts to this requirement. The first is the willingness to confront sin. We are told that we should rebuke a fellow Christian when we see him sinning. This isn’t a call to tell the whole world their faults. Rebuking a non-Christian for something they don’t believe anyway is futile and may create a stumbling block. This is about seeing clear sin in another believer and helping them be reconciled. As people outside the Jewish faith became believers, they were less aware of God’s moral commandments. And that’s true of new Christians in our own midst nowadays; since many people don’t know the foundations of Christian morality, some believers may not even realize when they sin! They don’t know the Bible well enough. Our job is not to judge but to teach and to warn with a gentle spirit. It’s through this kind of counsel that we know our need to repent and can receive forgiveness from one another.

Forgiveness like what Jesus teaches sounds like a great idea. The reality is that we like forgiveness when it's applied to us, but not so much when it's applied to others. When people hurt us, we don't want to let go of it. We want them to hurt like we hurt. But God says, let it go. We aren't to judge the sincerity of someone's repentance – if someone sins against us seven times in a day, they aren't doing a very good job at it! God doesn't seem so concerned about that. God wants our hearts to be right with Him, and to do that, we have to forgive, following Jesus' own selflessness that He showed on the cross. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us based on our own level of forgiveness. That means that forgiveness has to be like the air we breathe. We give it to everyone, all the time, even those unworthy of it.

The final requirement is faith. While the disciples aren't always the brightest guys, they realize what Jesus is asking for is far more difficult than they can accomplish. They don't have the Holy Spirit at this point; they barely understand Jesus as it is. The one thing they've got going for them is that they know they need something more. The disciples say, "Increase our faith!" But Jesus isn't so concerned about the measure of their faith so much that they actually *have* faith. Even a little faith can make the incredible happen. Jesus' example is absurd – who would want a tree to plant itself in the sea? But his point is, with faith, we can ask for things that seem impossible to the world's way of thinking and know that God will do them if they are within His perfect will. Growing in faith is important; Paul mentions it in his letters several times. But Jesus implies that if the disciples have any faith at all, they can do what God requires.

What the disciples are learning at this point is that knowing about God and knowing God are two separate things. As Jews of their era, they knew about God; they studied the Hebrew scriptures that we call the Old Testament. But they knew about God in the same way that someone today can know about airplanes. We could have a conversation about wind shear and fighter jets and the history of aircraft all day. But just because you know everything about the mechanics of an airliner doesn't mean you know what it is to fly. You won't understand an airplane really, not until you've been 30,000 feet in the air. The disciples, for all their knowledge about God, didn't know God. They followed around Jesus as a rabbi – a teacher. They thought He would teach them more information or debate the meanings of certain scriptures. Instead, He taught with authority; His word was definitive. What He taught wasn't information about God; it was the way to know God. His moral teachings that we've studied haven't been about being good people; it's been about getting to know who God is and what He desires for us and from us and being in relationship with Him. Faith isn't knowing that God exists; faith is knowing God and being willing to risk it all to know Him even more.

This should shake us up a bit. Some people define faith as going to church and listening to the pastor and thinking a bit about the good and moral things we should do each week. That's not what Jesus says. True faith, true belief, even in the smallest measure, is powerful. It's power that comes from the One in whom we believe, Jesus Christ. So we have to look at ourselves and say, do I have faith? Do I have the power God promises to those who really believe? Is my reluctance to share Christ with my close friends something that comes from my shyness, or is it because my fear of rejection is stronger than my faith? Is it something I have enough faith to be willing to overcome? Do I lean on the promises God has made to me in good times and bad, or do I count on myself unless things get out of control? Is God my crutch, or is God my life? Hard questions, and we'll get back to them in a minute.

Jesus ends this segment of teaching with a parable about someone who has a servant working out in the fields who comes in to serve the evening meal. For us, it's a tough parable because it sounds like the master here is gruff... "work in the fields, make my supper, serve me." But in Israel, bond-servants were treated much better than their Roman counterparts. Masters provided their necessities, and they could only be placed into service for six years. What's more, masters paid for their services up front, which made it very expensive. A servant wasn't owed thanks or a mealtime ahead of his master. His services had been purchased at considerable cost. The servant was simply doing his job.

Though the full weight of this parable doesn't become clear until after Jesus' death, the same thing applies to us. Just like the master expects his servant to do as he's asked, so God lays down the groundwork of our reasonable service to Him. Faith and forgiveness and devotion are what God demands. The reason He can demand them is because He, too, paid the price for us. Colossians 1:21-23 says this: "Once you were alienated from God and were [His] enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." Christ died for us, paid the price for us, even in our disobedience, in our disloyalty. If He is the one who rescues us from sin and death and hell, then our service to Him should not just be the minimum, but the most we can offer.

When we study a passage like this, it's easy to be overwhelmed. When we ask questions about our faith like we did a few minutes ago, we might find we come up short. We go home feeling guilty because we've been told to act more like Christ, but we don't know how to do it. We might make an attempt here or there, but we don't meet even Jesus' basic expectations. We can take heart, though, because this isn't something we do alone. The Holy Spirit is our guide and our strength. When we can say with a truthful heart, "Jesus is my savior and lord and I will follow Him," God gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live lives in obedience to God. The Spirit reminds us of what we've been taught and guides us towards the truth. Being a Christian isn't a solo sport; God does not put the burden on us to find Him. He already reached out to us through giving us His Son, and He continues to reach out to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you're worried that you can't meet God's minimums, you're looking to the wrong person. If God is your strength and salvation, trust He will give you the ability to serve Him. He will always come through. We can serve God because *He still serves us*, by providing everything we need through the Spirit's work in our lives. Even today, we learn by the example God is still setting for us.

This morning, we had the privilege of having a number of young people join the church, who shared their faith with us today. Their commitment over the last several months has been amazing. But now we're out of the book and out of confirmation class and into the real world where they'll have to put what they learned into practice. As most of us have learned, that's not easy. Staying true to God when the world around us despises His ways is tough. But my prayer for them this morning, and my prayer for all of us, is that we would stay committed to serving God through our faith, our devotion, and our forgiveness. God has promised never to leave or forsake us...if we can hold fast to these three things, our reasonable service to Him, then we know we will never leave or forsake Him either.