

Jesus, heading to Jerusalem to be crucified, has called and instructed his disciples to take up their cross and to follow him. He knows that the path of faith is dangerous and hard, and so offers us cautions and illustrations to help us avoid the pitfalls and follow him in faith.

Point 1 (17:1-4) — We ought to help (and never hinder) one another in following Jesus.

In verse 1, we read: "**And he said to his disciples, 'Temptations to sin are sure to come but woe to the one through whom they come!'**" "Temptations to sin" is the ESV's translation of a word that means "cause for stumbling"—something over which you might trip and fall as you walk down the path. It refers, in this context, to anything that might cause those following Jesus to stray from their allegiance to him.

Jesus says that such snares are inevitable. They are merely a fact of life. Nevertheless, he warns, **we should never be the source of such temptation.** "**Woe**" is a word pronouncing severe and certain condemnation. And in verse 2, Jesus describes how terrible is the future that awaits the one who would lead his people astray—"**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.**"

A "millstone" refers to the giant circular stone on the top half of a grain mill, so heavy that only a beast of burden could turn it. You can imagine, perhaps, the horror of being on a boat on the sea, having a millstone tied to your neck and then tossed overboard. All attempts to swim would be futile. You would be drowned before you had time to think. Your premature death would be inevitable. *And this is the better of the two options!* A worse fate than this awaits those who lead "these little ones" away from Jesus.

And who are "these little ones?" They are not children. Jesus speaks of "these," someone near to him in the context in which he is speaking. And Luke tells us this context: "he said to his disciples." "Little ones" refers to those who take up their cross and follow him. He cares for his people so much that promises the worst of fates to any who attempt to take them away from him.

Such stumbling blocks are certain—and we should never be one! **Instead,** Jesus says, "**Pay attention to yourselves!**" **We are commanded to keep watch over one another.** As our church covenant says:

We endeavor to exercise affectionate care and watchfulness for each other, using our spiritual gifts for the common good, so that together we might live to God's glory.

We endeavor to rejoice with each other's joys and bear each other's burdens with tenderness and sympathy. We strive to regularly encourage each other and pray for each other. When offenses occur, we stand ready to reconcile. We endeavor to submit to the church's discipline and lovingly assume our responsibility to participate in the discipline of other members, as taught in Scripture.

This affectionate care and watchfulness is defined by Jesus as having two parts: rebuke and forgiveness.

What should we do when we see a brother or sister succumbing to a stumbling block as they follow Jesus? Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.." **We should rebuke *the person in person for the sake of repentance and reconciliation.***

Note this: First, we rebuke “him,” the person. We do not rebuke some strawman or some hypothetical. We rebuke the one who is actually in the act of stumbling. This implies that we rebuke *in person*. We live in an electronic age in which the barrier of a screen has weaned us away from the art of face-to-face confrontation, making hint-dropping and passive-aggressive behavior far too easy and far too common. Jesus does not say to drop a hint on Facebook or Instagram, forward a post or an article, or pass along a book or sermon and hope he gets it; that is as ineffective and unhelpful as it is unloving. Neither does Jesus say that you should email or call an elder to report your concerns about your sister, and then hope that he deals with it. No, “If your brother sins, [you] rebuke him.”

There is, of course, the temptation here, to become heresy hunters and sin police, eager to practice this command and prove our allegiance to the truth. Charles Spurgeon, in his sermon “Forward,” warns of this stumbling block:

“At the same time, we should avoid everything like the ferocity of bigotry. There are religious people about, who, I have no doubt, were born of a woman, but they appear to have been suckled by a wolf. ...Some warlike men of this order have had power to found dynasties of thought; but human kindness and brotherly love consort better with the Kingdom of Christ. We are not to be always going about the world searching out heresies, like terrier dogs sniffing for rats, and to be always so confident of our own infallibility that we erect ecclesiastical stakes at which to roast all who differ from us, not, ’tis true, with [bundles] of wood, but with...strong prejudice and cruel suspicion.”

Such behavior is a stumbling block—one which turns people away from the body of Christ and from the Savior himself. In an age when self-appointed watchdog preachers are so easily accessible on the internet and compete for airtime and audience by constantly finding an enemy that you need them to warn you about. We, having whet our swords on the sharpening-stone of our favorite author, preacher, or podcaster, set out eager to use it to cut down some enemy (real or imagined). And so we come to church and hear in the words of the preacher, or go to Bible Study and find in the comments of every participant, or log on to social media and see in the posts of every church member that very error which our idolized-teacher has primed us to see—and then proceed to cut it (and them down) without mercy and wipe our blade clean and think ourselves to be heroes, when all we have been is the accuser and murderer of our brethren and a stumbling block to those for whom Christ died.

No the goal of Christ’s instruction is *not* the rebuke, but the recovery—the recovery of the brother and the relationship. **The emphasis of his instruction falls not on the rebuke but on the reconciliation.** We walk in Christian fellowship and practice rebuke with the aim of quick and full reconciliation.

Jesus continues, “...and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.” Seven times is not the upper limit. It is a figure of speech by which to indicate that we stand ready to forgive our wandering brothers and sisters as often as they stray and return. (And of course, if we know the patience, grace, and mercy shown to us in the salvation we have through Jesus, such ready and constant forgiveness should be a joy and no burden at all. Would that it were.)

Our joy is not found in cutting down sinners. Our joy is found in the treasure of Jesus Christ. Our joy is found in seeing others enjoy him with us. Our sorrow is found in others being drawn away from Christ—and therefore, we delight to see them return.

Consider a few questions for application and discussion this week: **In what specific ways might you a be stumbling block? Who specifically do you need to correct? ...forgive?**

Point 2 (17:5-6) — Watch out for unbelief!

At this point, “the Apostles” (a term Luke uses for the twelve disciples closest to Jesus) say to the Lord, **“Increase our faith!”** Given the context and order in which Luke presents this to us, it appears to be a response to what Christ has just said. Avoiding stumbling blocks, rebuking, and being ready with constant and unrelenting forgiveness seems to be an impossible assignment. They are convinced it will only be possible if they have more faith. That is, they see faithfulness and obedience to Jesus dependent upon the greatness of faith.

Jesus corrects this error when he says, “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.’”

I grew up on an old farm acreage. Entangled in the fence-lines were mulberry trees, having grown there after birds kindly deposited the seeds (in their own particular way). We had a mulberry tree near our burn pile, which my father once cut down and then burned the stump. Within no short time, it grew back again. They were almost impossible to kill. The black mulberry tree to which Jesus refers grew to be nearly thirty-five feet tall. Rabbis taught that its roots would remain in the earth for 600 years! In other words, it was virtually impossible to uproot. Yet Jesus says that with faith no bigger than the smallest of known seeds, it can be done.

The disciples erred in thinking that what mattered was the size of their faith. What mattered was *faith*—period. All that is required for following Jesus is to believe.

Here’s our application from this point: Look at the Gospel! Do you fear that you will trip over a stumbling block and fall away from following Jesus? Look at the Gospel! Jesus walked the road in faithfulness on your behalf. He shed his blood and died to redeem you from sin. He rose from the dead to declare you to be righteous before God. He ascended to God's right hand to pour out the Holy Spirit into your heart and see you adopted as a son of God yourself. Do you think that having done all this, he will now let you fall away? By no means!

Do you fear that you will be unable to forgive your brother or sister in Christ who repents and seeks reconciliation? Look at the Gospel! Christ died for and forgives you of sins infinitely worse than any offense you have ever endured at the hands of a brother or sister! Can you look at these elements—his body and his blood, broken and shed for you—and withhold grace from your neighbor? Do you think Christ has done all this for you and will now leave you powerless and unable to follow him? By no means!

The baseline minimum of saving faith is this—to believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead to bring you into his kingdom through the forgiveness of sins. And in this knowledge—in the Gospel—is everything you need for life and godliness.

Point 3 (17:7-10) — Watch out for pride!

Of course, for every person who hears Jesus’ call to follow him and responds in unbelief—“I could never do that!”—there is the person who responds in pride and says, “I got this!” They will point you to examples of their heroic action in rebuking the most treacherous of heretics and forgiving the vilest of offenders. They wear this faithfulness with a puffed-out chest, expecting everyone (including God) to come rushing with a medal, badge of honor, and a parade with candy-tossing floats.

So Jesus says to us, **“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.' ”**

We find in other parables that Jesus presents a picture of a master doing precisely the thing he says the master won't do. That's because the point of those parables was the gracious nature of our master (God). The point of this parable is the proper attitude of the servant—humble obedience.

A servant, Jesus says, does not expect a party in response to him doing his job. When he has finished one task, he moves on to the next one. That is what he is paid to do. The employer owes him no special thanks for the servant has simply done what was expected.

Likewise, when we have followed Jesus in faithfulness, rebuked our brother or sister in gentleness, and offered forgiveness and reconciled with speed and grace—when we have obeyed Jesus, we do not run to church looking to share our testimony and have people celebrate us, nor do we expect some special commendation from God. Our attitude is, “I am an unworthy servant; I have only done what was my duty.”

By application, I would ask: Where are you boasting? Are there aspects of following Jesus that you think are easy, upon which you pride yourself for your obedience? Are there acts of obedience and service you have performed—perhaps rebuking and forgiving, perhaps child-raising or disciple-making or faithfulness as a spouse or an unmarried, perhaps in leadership or service in the church, perhaps in evangelism and missions, perhaps in giving and benevolence, the list could go on and on. Are there instances of dutiful-obedience to Jesus that you think make you something special in the kingdom? Are you growing bitter and disgruntled that no one seems to be noticing you, thanking you, commending you, appreciating you?

God calls us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus calls us to love him by taking up an instrument of execution and following him to our death. Jesus commands us to love one another as he loved us—by laying down our lives for him and one another.

So, when we have done that—when we have sacrificed everything, when we have *died* for Christ and for our brothers and sisters in the church—the most we can say is, **“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”**

Friends, Christ gave his life for us. He died to save us. He rose to save us. He reigns to save us. This kingdom is about him—not about us. **If you can't get over what Jesus has done, you'll quickly get over yourself.**

Point 4 (17:11-19) — We are made well only by grace through faith in our God and Savior Jesus Christ. This teaching on the humble servant is immediately illustrated by Jesus' encounter with a group of lepers. The setting is somewhere on the border of Samaria and Galilee. Though Jews and Samaritans had little to do with one another, the affliction of leprosy can make for strange bedfellows.

“And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance.” Leprosy referred to a host of destructive skin diseases, some contagious, which left a person literally falling

apart and also unclean according to the Mosaic Law. Lepers were required to maintain a certain distance from clean persons—thus, they lived in colonies outside of town and were required to announce their presence as they traveled by shouting, "Leper! Leper!" to warn others of possible contamination.

So these lepers stood at a distance and shouted, **"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."** Doubtless, they wished for him to heal them.

"When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' "This is an interesting command. Those believing themselves to be healed of leprosy were required to show themselves to the priest, who would examine them and make a declaration on their state. Jesus is asked them to act as if they are healed—to respond in faith—which they do. **"And as they went they were cleansed."** As they acted in faith, the miracle occurred.

"Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan."

"Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'"

There are several interesting things here, which we do not have time to explore fully.

First, this man was the last man expected to recognize the saving work of God—he was a Samaritan. Where the Israelites remained blind to who Jesus is, a foreigner recognized and believed.

Second, **Jesus is treated as (and refers to himself as) God!** The thankful leper "turned back, praising *God* with a loud voice." He's praising God, to whom does he give thanks? "He fell on his face at *Jesus'* feet, giving *him* thanks." This is the only occasion in all the Gospels where thanks is given expressly to Jesus, and not generically to "God." Jesus receives the man's thank and refers to it as "praise to God." **Jesus calls himself God and accepts praise as such.** The only way to worship God is through faith in Jesus the God-Man.

But the main point of this story comes in the final verse: **"And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.'** "Jesus tells the man that his *faith*—his recognition and belief that God is working salvation through the person of Jesus Christ is what saved him. He has not merely been "cleansed" like the others; this man has been "made well"—saved. And this salvation came through a faith that worshipped Jesus.

Look at the table this morning: This table reminds us of where and how God has worked to cleanse us and to save us. In the person of Jesus Christ, God has come to dwell with us. He took on flesh. He lived our life. He died our death. He conquered sin, death, and the power of the devil.

We are not saved by the enormity of our faith or by the extensiveness of our service. We are made well in one—and only one—way: by trusting that God has brought us salvation through Jesus.

This is the source of our strength and our humility. This is our source for our love for one another—for who can hold the love of God (the body and blood of Christ) in their hands and then withhold love from their neighbor?

This is the removal and cure for every temptation and stumbling block: Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead. We hold this. We eat this. We believe this. And by such faith, we are saved.