



## **feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)**

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October 1, 2013

Dear Church Family,

We are back in our narrative study of the gospel of Luke and have a lot of ground to cover to finish the series before Christmas. So we will be taking even larger chunks and focusing primarily on connections and how different scenes relate to one another. Picking up the story in chapter 17, Jesus addresses the seriousness of sin, emphasizing that disciples should pay attention to themselves and not be a source of temptation to others and, when people are in sin, to restore them. Fresh in our minds is the story of the rich man and Lazarus where the rich man, now aware of the seriousness of his sin, asks for Lazarus to return from the dead in order to get his brothers to repent. The rich man, with his opulent lifestyle, may well be an example of someone who is a source of temptation for his brothers. We need to take seriously this command of Jesus and consider how we might be a source of temptation to others.

We are also to seek to restore those who are sinning. This is done through rebuke and offering forgiveness. The call to rebuke the sinner is to lead them to repentance. We are not at all comfortable with the command to rebuke a sinner. Our culture's aversion to the idea of judgment has influenced us to ignore this aspect of the gospel. This has led to a casual attitude toward unrepentant sin, as if with Jesus it does not really negatively affect us. This is not at all the impression that we get from Jesus here. We also fail to appreciate the importance of repentance in the process of forgiveness. Those who are sinned against are able to forgive those who have not repented of their sin, which is necessary for them to be released from that burden. But they are not able to have restored relationship. And with any sin, God is first and foremost the one who is sinned against. A scholar has captured the importance of rebuke and forgiveness in this quotation, "Forgiveness that embraces both indictment and invitation is the forgiveness that God offers us again and again and again." And while this may be difficult for us to offer others, we are sure glad that God offers it to us!

The disciple's request for more faith appears to be in response to Jesus' teaching and their own sense of inadequacy to fulfill it. As readers, we would see this as a good request. However, Jesus' response appears to identify a flaw in the request. His initial response indicates that the amount of faith is not the issue, but rather whether there is any faith at all. He then tells the story about the servant. This story emphasizes two points. First, servants should focus on doing what they are asked or expected to do rather than expecting something from their master. Perhaps Jesus is responding that his teaching on sin and forgiveness does not require more faith as much as it requires obedience. Second, Jesus is teaching against any sense of entitlement in a disciple, any sense that through obedience one has earned some sort of reward. And a teaching on entitlement is related to forgiveness because a sense of entitlement undermines the ability to let go of debt and hurt and truly forgive someone. Entitlement further undermines the experience of grace, undeserved favor, that we have with God which also empowers forgiveness. Indeed, an attitude of entitlement will really mess up our relationship with God. Consider what it would do to the equation we have identified. Awareness of Sin x awareness of forgiveness = love for God. If we feel like God owes us, instead of us owing him for what he has done in Jesus Christ, our devotion and obedience suffer.

The opposite of entitlement is gratitude, which is the focus on the story of the healing of the 10 lepers. All 10 are healed, but only one, a Samaritan, returns to give thanks. He is the one who Jesus declares well because his relationship with God has been restored.

Jesus then responds to a question from the Pharisees about the coming of the kingdom of God and uses that to teach

his disciples about what to expect in the future. They should expect that these days will be difficult and they will long for the days to end. In this longing they will be susceptible to deception and following after false signs of his return. This will be a time that will give rise to lament, as Stuart looked at last week, when God is not responding as they would hope and expect. And they will be tempted to lose heart.

It is this context that Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” This is not a parable to explain why prayers sometimes go unanswered. The reason for the judge’s refusal to heed the widow’s request cannot possibly apply to God and our request because God is not like the unjust judge. It is also not a teaching on effective prayer technique. To conclude that Jesus is teaching that what works with this judge will work with God is problematic. Are we really meant to picture God granting our prayer because He is afraid that we will wear Him out (the language is actually more violent than this and is best translated as “assault”)? This story emphasizes the attitude of faith that the widow had, not her strategy. It is the type of faith that Jesus wants to find when He comes. This is a faith that is not at all dependent on encouraging or discouraging circumstances. This widow has no reason, no evidence at all, to expect that the judge will grant her request. She has no means by which to influence him (either through money or social connections) and he is not inclined to care about her situation because of God, compassion, or even concern for his own reputation. Faced with these realities, anyone would tell her that she was wasting her time. And that is the main point. If the story of the widow is the type of faith that Jesus expects us to have, then we are not justified when discouraging circumstances tempt us to give up in prayer. Our circumstances are not nearly as discouraging or hopeless as hers because we are coming to God our Father who is not like the unjust judge. Jesus understands our discouragement and how it affects our prayer lives, but He does not excuse it or accept it. He expects to find faith in us regardless of discouraging circumstances.

At the end of this story, Jesus puts the focus on the faith of the widow, not the results. Are we too results oriented when it comes to prayer? Phillip Yancey writes, “In my travel, I have found that Christians in developing countries spend less time pondering the effectiveness of prayer and more time actually praying.” This does not mean that we should not care whether our prayers are answered or not. Of course we care. That is why we ask. It means that a lack of expected results does not diminish how much we care. We do not lose heart.

Jesus’ message on not losing heart in prayer is a message that we need in those times that Stuart talked about when we need to “get it and yet it.” Those times challenge our faith but we must continue to express our faith through prayer. Jesus knows that this is what we need which is why he commands us to not lose heart in prayer. It is helpful to realize that the type of faith that Jesus wants to find is the most present when we are persevering in prayer for that which we have not yet been given.

We hope you are able to gather with us for our retreat this weekend where we will be focusing our discussions on prayer.

In Him,  
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<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)