

In Luke 17:1-10 the audience changes from the crowd (which included the Pharisees) to the disciples. In this passage, Jesus emphasizes four characteristics of those who desire to be His disciple. The passage is hard to summarize as a unit because it lacks any single, unifying idea. Luke may simply be summarizing what Jesus said, streamlining the discussion by eliminating the conversation that led to each topic. Listed are the four topics on which Jesus instructs His disciples: (1) causing others to stumble, (2) rebuking sin and forgiving others, (3) the nature of faith, and (4) having the ideal servant's heart.

***17:1 He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come!"***

***17:2 "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble."***

17:1a makes it clear that it is impossible not to encounter stumbling blocks; Jesus said, "*It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come.*" However, "this does not absolve people of responsibility for its happening" (Edwards, 475).

A stumbling block is an obstacle that causes someone to fall. Originally, it was a trap or a snare. Metaphorically, it is something that prevents people from coming to faith or is the cause that makes them go astray. In this context, it is anyone who hinders people from following Jesus.

1. The world is full of stumbling blocks that lure people away from Christ. In Matthew 18:6, 9 Jesus said, "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! . . . If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell." In this case, the members of our own bodies are the cause of stumbling. Our love for the world is often what derails us from pursuing the things of God.

2. The Pharisees were stumbling blocks by leading people away from the truth. In Matthew 23:15 Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." In Acts 20:29-30 Paul warned, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." 2 Peter 2:1-2 says, ". . . false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them. . . Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned. . . "

3. Christians can also cause other Christians to stumble. This is why Jesus is warning the disciples. In Romans 14, Paul illustrates how exercising Christian liberties unwisely or selfishly can cause people to violate their conscience and stumble; they stumble because others in the Christian community tempt them to deviate from the pathway that they believe God would want them to walk. Romans 14:13 says, "determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling

block in a brother's way." Likewise, 1 Corinthians 8:9 says, "take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

Jesus' passionate hostility against anyone who would hinder someone from coming to Him is expressed when He says that it would be preferable to be drowned with a millstone hung around one's neck than to cause "one of these little ones to stumble." A millstone is the large, upper stone used for grinding grain at a mill. The implication is that it would be far better to suffer the most horrific death in this life than to face the severity of punishment at the judgment for leading someone away from Christ.

"Little ones" is not a reference to children, but is a tender way of referring to those who follow Jesus. It may also possibly draw attention to the weak or helpless such as Lazarus (Lk. 16), the man with dropsy (Lk. 14:1-6), or the crippled woman (Lk. 13:11-16).

Jesus is not just informing the disciples of how serious it is to cause someone to stumble; he is warning them to take extreme caution not to cause others to be hindered in their faith.

**17:3 "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.**

**17:4 "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."**

We should not only be concerned about our own sins, but should also be concerned that we aren't the cause of someone else sinning (see also notes on Matt. 5:23, 24) and have enough care for others that we do not allow sin to go unchallenged in the Christian community.

If a fellow believer sins, it is our responsibility to rebuke them. Of course, this should be done out of the concern that the one whom we are rebuking grows in holiness (cf. Matt. 18:15-18; Lk. 6:37; Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 5:14-15; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Titus 3:10). This also means that "disciples are not to pursue their spirituality in isolation from one another. For Jesus, faith is not merely a private affair, but something the community pursues together. The community of believers is our family in the sense that the best interest of each member is a concern of each other member. Thus, the call to rebuke is the exercise of our familial responsibility. The assumption in all of this is that disciples have a certain quality in their relationship that allows this type of positive, honest, loving, confronting behavior to occur without destroying their relationships" (Bock, 1387).

Jesus probably isn't talking about confronting anything and everything that someone else does. 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." There is a multitude of sins that love hides. "Above all" emphasizes the primary importance of love; love is the characteristic that enables the Christian community to survive. Love refuses to deliberately drag out the injuries received by others; it refrains from talking about them; it discards bitterness. Love therefore effectively puts an end to the problem. Love buries sins leveled against us. "This gracious action of true love promotes the peace and harmony of the brotherhood, and is the very opposite of hatred which deliberately exposes the sin in order to humiliate and injure" (Hiebert). Proverbs 10:12 also says, "Love covers all transgressions." 1 Corinthians 13 says, "Love does not take into account a wrong suffered." That is, love keeps no record of wrongs. Covering another's transgression is the

essence of forgiveness. Psalm 32:1 makes this clear: "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." To forgive sin is to cover sin.

Rather, Jesus is primarily talking about confronting someone who sins against us. After Jesus says, "if he repents, forgive him," He expands upon the limitlessness of our forgiveness; but He also clarifies that the sin being rebuked is a sin against "you." "If he sins *against you* seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." Matthew 18:15-17 is probably an expanded version of the same idea: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Disciples are to rebuke, but they are also to be quick to forgive when repentance is present. In other words, a disciple of Jesus should not be weak in his or her attitude toward sin; yet at the same time, he or she should be compassionate toward the sinner and be quick to forgive if they repent. In fact, according to verse 4, forgiveness should be habitual and without limit; "if he sins against you *seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.*"

True repentance means that the sinner recognizes and admits his sin and turns from it. Forced repentance generates repentance that isn't genuine.

Although we would question the genuineness of repentance if after a couple of hours the person committed the same sin, this verse implies that someone can truly repent and yet commit the same sin again soon after, due to the weakness of the flesh. Jesus' point is that whenever someone seeks forgiveness it should be granted. The Lord taught the disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Forgiveness is possible when we recognize that we all share a common guilt and we all need forgiveness. If we are bold enough to ask God to forgive us, we should be generous enough to forgive others.

The principles in verses 1-4 are all tied to how we are to live in a sinful world.

- First, disciples of Jesus do not lead others into sin. They live their lives in such a way that they do not become stumbling blocks to others, either by teaching false doctrine or behavior.
- Secondly, disciples do not allow sin to go unchecked in the Christian family. They admonish those who sin, helping them to grow in righteousness.
- Thirdly, disciples are quick to forgive others who sin against them.

***17:5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"***

***17:6 And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.***

The disciples ask Jesus for more faith (possibly due to the difficulty of the demands they had just heard). Jesus' response is not that they need *more* faith; even the presence of the smallest amount of faith can accomplish great things.

The sentence, "If you had faith like a mustard seed. . ." is a first class condition in Greek, which assumes the reality of the statement for the sake of argument. It is, therefore, probably better translated as "if you have faith. . ." (NIV, NKJ) not "if you *had* faith" (NAS, ESV). In other words, it is possible that Jesus isn't rebuking them for a lack of faith ("If you had faith . . .") rather, He is telling them that if they have faith (which for the sake of the argument He assumes they do), then they have what they need for the task (Garland 680- 681; Talbert, 190 – Garland gives some good reasoning to see this as a positive statement, not a rebuke; also Talbert, 190).

A "mustard seed," the smallest seed commonly known, pictures the smallest amount of faith. Even the smallest amount of faith imaginable is ample to do great things. It is the absence of faith that prevents things from happening. "Christians, even apostles, are distinguished not by the quantity of faith, but by the employment of faith; not by greatness or smallness of faith, but by acting on faith, even faith the size of a mustard seed" (Edwards, 479).

The tree in Jesus' illustration is probably a black mulberry, a tree that had a vast root system which allowed it to live for hundreds of years. It is the image of invincible steadfastness. To "plant a tree in the sea" is an odd thing to say, but fits Jesus' pattern of generating surprising images.

It is obvious that Jesus is using a figure of speech. The disciples knew He wasn't talking about moving trees around. The image is of the power of the smallest amount of genuine faith to move something that is so solidly planted in the ground no one could imagine moving it! True faith can do that which is otherwise unthinkable.

***17:7 "Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'?"***

***17:8 "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink '?"***

***17:9 "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?"***

***17:10 "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"***

Verses 7-10 illustrate the ideal attitude one should have in serving God.

The servant in Jesus' story had spent all day in the field, either plowing or tending the sheep, and came home tired and dirty. Even after a full day of hard work, would anyone expect the master to say to the servant, "Come immediately and sit down to eat?"

Of course, no one would have expected such a thing. There was never a reversal of roles. The master shouldn't feel obligated or reward the servant for doing what was expected of him. Even after a day's work it was still the servant's responsibility to clean up, prepare dinner, and serve the master. It was only after the slave had done all that was required for the master that he could attend to his own needs (contrast Lk. 12:35-38).

In verse 9 Jesus pointed out that there is no need for the master even to thank the servant. Working, preparing dinner, and serving the master were all normal things to do; the servant was not going beyond the call of duty. If he was a hired servant, that was what he was hired to do.

Verse 10 applies verses 7 to 9 to the disciples' service toward God. "If such service and submission are expected in earthly slave-master relationships, how much more so in human relationships with God" (Garland, 684). Obedience and service is not a cause of merit. A disciple is not entitled to something for doing what he should do.

God owes us nothing. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy." In verse 5 of the same chapter he says, "wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

Although this story is not a conclusion per se, it does nicely conclude the three preceding instructions. As servants of Christ we are to be careful not to cause someone to stumble. We are also told to confront sin, forgive others, and demonstrate faith. Doing these things does not obligate God to us; we are simply doing what we should do as His servants.

In a roundabout way this also reminds us of the grace of God; since God owes us nothing, anything He gives comes from His mercy and grace. Considering that He has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3), made us alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5), and gave us access to Him (Eph. 2:18), we should fall to our faces in praise and adoration for His goodness to us.