

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 17:1-10 **“Discipleship Up Close”**

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(8th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 17:1-10 "DISCIPLESHIP UP CLOSE"

WHAT ARE DISCIPLES TO DO? Influence each other for good, not evil.

1) vv.1-4 THE SIN ISSUE IN THE COMMUNITY.		DISCIPLES = APPRENTICES
		<i>Healed Relationships Between Disciples Are Crucial</i>
a) vv.1-2 Inevitable Temptation And The Importance Of Not Involving Others.		<i>My Sins //Mk. 9:42, Mt. 18:6-7 (Q)</i>
1	And he (i.e. Jesus) said to his disciples ,	Those Who Were Already His Followers/ Insiders
1	“Temptations to sin (lit. ‘stumble’) are sure to come; (Lit. “It is impossible for scandals [traps, snares] not to come;)	No Utopia, Nature Of Our Fallen World = Moral Battleground
2	but woe to him by whom they come!	Awkward Double Negative
2	2' It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast INTO THE SEA,	It Is A Sin To Tempt/Corrupt Others, Do The Devil’s Work
1'	than that he should cause one of ‘these little ones’ to sin (“to stumble”).	Woe = Preliminary Announcement Of Death
		Better To Drown Than Corrupt Others!
		1 Cor. 3:17, Link To Next Unit, v. 6 “in the sea”
		1 Cor. 8:9ff., Vengeance Belongs To God
		Issue = (-) Influence, “Little Ones” = Vulnerable Christians
b) vv.3-4 Confronting Sin And Nurturing The Habit Of Forgiveness.		Sins Of Others
		<i>//Matthew 18:15, 21-22 (Q), T. Gad. 6:3</i>
3	Take heed to yourselves;	How To Use influence (+), Self-Examination, Mutual Dependence
1	if your brother sins , rebuke him,	General, Accountability/Reproof As Mutual Love, 1 Jn. 5:16, Acts 10:15, Rev. 3:19
2	and if he repents,	Sees His Error, Honest Acknowledgement, “I sinned against you.”
3	forgive him;	Tear Up The I.O.U., Release For Both, Mt. 18:15
4	1' and if he sins against you seven times in the day,	Specific, Close Living Arrangements! Sin As An Ingrained Habit
2'	and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’	6:35-38, 11:4, Repentance As A Learned Habit Of Humility
3'	you must (will) forgive him.”	Mimic God! Forgiveness As A Habit Of Grace Between Sinners

ARE WE ABLE TO DO IT? Yes, if we exercise the trust we already have.

2) vv.5-6 THE FAITH ISSUE: A LITTLE IS ENOUGH.		APOSTLES = AMBASSADORS
		<i>Inquiry + Aphorism On Faith //Mt. 17:20 (Q)</i>
5	The apostles said to the Lord,	Faith = Responsive Trust To Do The , Not Magic, Not Control God
		9:10, 11:1, In Response To Hard Teaching, They Feel Overwhelmed
		“Make us a faithful people,” We Can’t Do This Without God!!
6	And the Lord said,	Mt. 17:20, 21:21, Mk. 11:22-23
		Which You Do! Tiny, Explosive Seed, Impossible Is Possible
		Black Mulberry/ Deep Roots
		They Do Not Have Faith, But Small Faith Will Do Quite Fine If Rightly Placed
		Trust In God Is A Potent Force, Deliberate Use Of An Extreme Example

DO WE UNDERSTAND THE TERMS? Obedience to Jesus is not merit but privilege.

3) vv.7-10 THE ISSUE OF DUTY AND COMMENDATION.		SERVANTS = SLAVES
		<i>If We Do What Is Required, We Cannot Do More Than Is Required</i>
a) vv.7-9 Three Questions And Answers (Two Negative Answers, One Positive).		Parable + App
		To Serve This Master Is Always A Privilege
7	1 “Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep,	Sir. 33: 25-30, 17:7-9. 10 Only In Luke (L)
		Already Worked All Day!
		‘Come at once and sit down at table’? (Answer: Of course not!)
		vv.7-9 = Master’s Viewpoint, v.10 = Slave’s Viewpoint
8	2 Will he not rather say to him,	Small Landowner, One Slave
		‘Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink’? (Answer: Of course, Yes!)
		Slave, Not Master, Remains Under Obligation
9	1'a Does he thank (favor) the <u>servant</u>	Taken-for-granted Social Script, Not A Patron/Client Relationship
b	because he did what was <u>commanded</u> ?	(Answer: Of Course Not!) Long Analogy: 3 Questions
		Jesus Has The Right To Tell Me What To Do, When To Do It
b) v.10 Application To Disciples: Don’t Look For Praise For Duties.		Pirke Aboth 1:3
		No Rewards Because Of Our Merit, Jesus Makes Our Status Crystal Clear
10	b’ So you also, when you have done all that is <u>commanded</u> you, say,	15:29, No Works Of Supererogation
a’	‘We are unworthy <u>servants</u> ; we have only done what was our duty.’”	No Way To Put God In Our Debt

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 17:1-10

There are several reasons 17:1-10 is to be taken as the next literary unit in the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. The previous unit (16:1-31) has a clear internal structure (A-B//B'-A') which opens and closes with parables about *a rich man*. In 17:1 there is a shift of audience from Pharisees to the *disciples*. Three terms for Jesus followers (*disciples*, v.1; *apostles*, v.5; *servants*, v.10) tie the unit together. The phrase *into the sea* links the first two paragraphs (vv.2, 6b). The introduction of the term *Lord* in v.5 prepares for the *master/slave* analogy in 3. vv.7-10. The subsequent travel report of v.11 changes the setting, "On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along..." and introduces a healing story. That we have *parables* before the didactic unit of 17:1-10 and a *healing* afterwards marks out these verses as distinct in genre as *instruction*. Each of the three paragraphs has internal catchwords: *sin*: vv. 1a, 2b, 3a, 4a; *Lord / faith*: vv.5, 6; *servant*: vv.7a, 9a, 10b, *commanded*; vv.9b, 10a. Paragraphs 1. vv.1-4 and 2. vv.5-6 have verbal parallels in different places in Matthew (Q), while Paragraph 3. vv.7-10 is found only in Luke (L). From the editorial introductions of v.1a, "And he said to his disciples," v.3a, "Take heed to yourselves," v.5, "The apostles said to the Lord..." and from the general arrangement and sequence it is clear 17:1-10 is a cohesive three-part Lucan creation on the nature of discipleship with a focus on leaders in their various roles as apprentice learners (*disciples*), authorized ambassadors (*apostles*), and *slaves* of Jesus. While there are other audiences along the way, there are also occasional sidebars for insiders, and this is one of them. It is a serious to misuse influence to damage others (vv.1-2), to avoid either direct accountability or ready forgiveness (vv.3-4), not to use the faith one has (vv.5-6), or to forget that our ministries are grounded in obedience to Jesus, and that all rewards are intrinsic to that relationship (v.10).

Paragraph 1 has two parts (a. vv.1-2, b. vv.3-4) both of which have to do with sin. "These little ones" is a euphemism for weaker, more vulnerable members. While the nature of the current world is that opportunities to sin are everywhere, to be the agent who trips up another brings judgment, "but woe to him *by whom* they come," the horror of which is seen in the millstone image (v.2). Better to be crushed in the depths than crush the trust of *a little one*. To corrupt one for whom Christ died is to become an agent of the Evil One. If vv.1-2 works off the polarity of *the strong* and *the weak*, vv.3-4 uses the more mutual image of *brothers* (and sisters) who work against the creeping corrosion of sin the community. All are accountable, all subject to correction, and -if there is repentance- to repeated and immediate restoration. Disciples nourish and protect the weak even as they hold themselves highly accountable in love.

That such practices are hard to maintain is indicated by the *apostles* unified request for more faith (v.5), literally "Add faith to us." Jesus' reply in v.6 is a mild rebuke in that the issue is not *more faith* but use of the *little faith* they already have. The hyperbole contrasts the proverbially small mustard seed with the proverbially deep roots of the black mulberry. If placed in God, small faith is quite enough because it is rightly placed in the One for whom power is never an issue. Obey, be faithful, stay faithful, and watch God work to change the landscape and root up deep issues. Faith must make a beginning in obedience.

The third paragraph has two parts. In a. vv.7-9 is a parable in three carefully structured questions, the first (1. v.7) and last (1' v.9) of which expect a *No* answer, and the middle question (2. v.8) a *Yes*. Then, in b. v.10 the analogy is unambiguously applied. That Jesus readily uses master/slave language does not imply his approval of slavery; rather, he employs a widely understood social structure as an analogy. The setting is a small farmer with one slave who does outside and inside chores. No one expects him to eat first or to be thanked because he did what was commanded since such is the nature of the relationship. And when we as followers do our duties, Jesus is not in our debt. Get it? All rewards are intrinsic.

DISCIPLESHIP UP CLOSE

“It is impossible for occasions of stumbling not to come.”

Jesus the ultimate realist on the reality of our present world.

LUKE 17:1

Ours is the *age of entertainment*. Author Neil Postman says we’re *amusing ourselves to death*.¹ Everything must be fun and titillating and humorous to be worthwhile. News has become entertainment; politics has become entertainment. Once entertainment reigns, attention shrinks to a sound-byte. Once God is displaced from the center of worship and *my experience of being entertained* becomes dominant, then boredom is the curse applied to anything that does not immediately excite me. Teenagers have always been good at this; it’s now epidemic among us all. Mass distraction is a stage on the way to mass deception. If you reduce life to the trivial and the hip, the clever and the showy, it’s much easier to lead people another way.

Worship as *entertainment* loses something, doesn’t it? Like capacity to be serious about a holy God and sin’s awful power to entrap and deceive, about forgiveness and community and duty. I sometimes say to people, “I’m about to tell you something you won’t read in the paper or hear in the news. It’s not pop-psychology. I’m a biblical minority report in your life. Can you handle it?”

Being on the road with Jesus, as the disciples were on their last trip to Jerusalem, was an adventure. After all, they left homes, jobs, and families for a chance to travel as his posse and watch the new kingdom he represented invade village after village. Along the way their perception of what was possible changed dramatically. What a thrill to watch the eyes of the blind open or see the dramatic change when he expelled a covey of demons with a word and the person was freed. And when he dressed down the Pharisees, it was better than a boxing match. No one ever told such

¹ *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1985).

stories as Jesus told; he had people hanging on every word. In him mercy and truth were joined, love and help kissed one another; in him living water bubbled up like a spring in the desert. He was an oasis in a dry world, and the people came. I don't know how to say *Wow!* in Aramaic, but there was lots of *Wow!* around Jesus. The crowds came for bread and healings, bringing their political hopes to project onto Jesus as Messiah; he met their needs but short-circuited their dreams. I don't think I'd call it *entertaining*, but being around him was *intensely meaningful*. It wasn't a game; it was a war of liberation from disease and ignorance and death and despair and the demonic and bad religion and lack of love. Jesus was the cure for God's people.

There were also times when the crowds were gone and Jesus sat face-to-face with his disciples, when what he had to say was neither entertaining nor amusing. When he finished, it was quiet. It's good to leave church some Sundays feeling as if you're peering over the edge into a gorge. That dizzy feeling. I experienced it this week as I pondered the text before us this morning. It is about *heavy* topics like the world as a dangerous place to live and God's wrath on those who corrupt others, about accountability and forgiveness and faith as ingrained habits, about the nature of our duty to God. Jesus did not address it to the masses, only to those who were already followers: verse 1, "And Jesus said *to his disciples*," whom he also calls- using other titles- *ambassadors* and *slaves*. The followed him, were sent to others as his ambassadors, and remained in an obedient relationship.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) The Sin Issue In Community (vv.1-4)

It bothers me Jesus is portrayed in pop culture as a bit naive and other-worldly. He was, the church teaches, innocent of sin, though tempted at every point.² Rebellion never infected and polluted his perceptions the way it has us, but he was anything but naive. In his purity of heart and singleness of eye he saw life as it is. He was the ultimate realist and said openly that this world under the influence of the Evil One is not a safe place. Life is a battlefield with real casualties, not a playground or a joy ride. Still God's creation? Yes. But safe under current circumstances and alien rule? Hardly. Consider his words in verse 1, "Temptations to sin are sure to come," or as a more literal translation reads using a double negative, "It is impossible for occasions of stumbling not to come." We know it's true; like you I have the scars to prove it.

² Heb. 4:15.

There is a constellation of powers always tugging us away from God, and it's not just something *outside me, out there* and *exterior* to the self; it's all around me and in my deepest heart. Temptation is our comprehensive environment. We live in a moral pressure-cooker and are prone to all sorts of compromises, and the more we make the less aware we are of them. I'm vulnerable to temptations of all sorts, inward and outward, trivial and tragic, because I'm already compromised at the center. I am, as we say, *user-friendly*. To use a medical analogy, I'm open to opportunistic infections because of a compromised immune system. I'm a battleground, as are you. And if I don't see the battle and the tactics, I'm done for. Jesus said life is a walk across a minefield, "Temptations to sin are sure to come. You will mess up and need the humility of confession and the gift of forgiveness. And if you're fortunate, some one will care enough to get in your face and love you back to sanity."

If we as Methodists ever weaken our first baptismal promise it will be a loss. And why? Because it accurately represents the spiritual and moral complexity of the world in which we live; it's a great map. At the center of the self our hearts are infected with rebellion; in the next outer layer our culture is arranged to distract and deceive us, and beyond that resides a third layer of spiritual opposition that's never passive. An infected heart, a corrupted world, a real conspiracy. This is the meaning of the first promise we ask a new Christian or the parents of a child:

"On behalf of the whole church, I ask you:
Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?" **I do.**³

This is a biblical map of current reality and to remove any part is to weaken its explanatory power. But then another voice is heard, "You're not a sinner, just a misunderstood, innocent person. The world is your friend, so make friends with all it offers. There is no Evil One, no invisible forces plotting your destruction. Relax and enjoy!" No. It's not true, which is why our first vow is tough realism using the biblical language of *wickedness* and *evil* and *sin* and calling for lifelong opposition: to *renounce, reject, repent*. If dumbing down the faith made us attractive, the mainline churches would all be growing. We have been hollowed out and become squishy.

Someone is actively digging pits hoping you fall in them. Someone who knows

³ *The U.M. Hymnal*, "The Baptismal Covenant I," 38.

your weaknesses is plotting to corrupt you and fill you with shame and guilt. Someone who knows which bait you bite is trolling for you.⁴ The good news is that Jesus told us ahead of time, and we have the Holy Spirit as our early warning radar. You can never give up spiritual vigilance and moral awareness. “It is *impossible*,” he said, “for occasions of scandal and stumbling not to come.” They’re going to come. Are you prepared? Every day, every follower experiences temptation because of constant pressure from three levels: the spiritual forces of wickedness, the evil powers of this world, and their own complicity with sin. William Vander Hoven got it right, “At every fork in the road the devil is dangling the carrot down the wrong path.”⁵

Each of us has a unique temptation profile.⁶ Thomas a Kempis wrote, “Temptation discovers what we are.”⁷ Examine your habitual temptations - where you repeatedly fail, inwardly and outwardly- and you will map the contours of your soul. Jesus saw life as a spiritual battle, and the closer we come to him the clearer we get both about both the conflict and our vulnerability. So the Christian life is about being alert. Temptations teach us about ourselves and serve to drive us to Jesus Christ for protection and help. That day he looked at his friends and spoke soberly, “Everything around you is mine field and an obstacle course. *It is impossible for occasions to sin not to come.*” This is not a negative view of life; it’s simply how it is East of Eden and this side of the coming new world. It’s why three of the core petitions in the Lord’s prayer are about sin and temptation and being delivered from Evil. It’s a spiritually and morally hostile world, and Christians know he score. We should not at all be surprised when we struggle and fall. Soldiers in a battle are not surprised when someone’s shot, and we should not be surprised at what we and others are capable of. We need to watch out for and protect one another’s blind spots, which means we must live in community where we are known and tell the truth about ourselves.

And if that’s not frightening enough, Jesus went on to pronounce a woe of grief over anyone who tempts someone else. Have you noticed that sin always wants company, to pull the other person down? It hates naivete and innocence; it despises

⁴ I Peter 5:8.

⁵ Albert M. Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 199.

⁶ For practical help, see Maxie Dunnam, *The Devil At Noon Day: Battling Temptations in Daily Life* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1996).

⁷ Wells, *Inspiring*, 199.

moral excellence. It's one thing to give in to temptation personally; it's another whole level to be a vehicle of temptation for another, "but woe to him *by whom* they come!" One is misdemeanor, the other a felony. You are not responsible for my choices and compromises, nor I yours, but there is a greater degree of judgment for those who lead others into sin because they are doing the devil's work for him. When we corrupt others, we make God our executioner; so says Jesus.

My first drink at age fifteen was my choice, but I remember the person who offered it to me with the promise it would make me part of the *cool crowd* I so hungered in my loneliness to be part of. I could have killed myself or another while driving. There were older and I younger, which is often the case. I never developed an addiction, but some do. My misdemeanor, their felony. Same with my first joint and first exposure to porn. I never developed a destructive addiction, but both did damage to me by inflaming lawlessness and lust. My misdemeanor, their felony. Same with racial bigotry and disrespect for holy things, but the petty stealing I did and later repaid with tears after my conversion was *all my own*. Most sin is social; we teach one another; we draw the naive into webs of wickedness to their and our destruction. We become the instruments of evil when our actions and attitudes and freedoms and finances are used to tempt and further corrupt others, and God holds us fearfully accountable. "But woe to him *by whom* they come" said Jesus, and a woe is a cry of grief over coming destruction, as if they were singing a funeral dirge before you died. So if God brings to mind an event where you were the occasion for someone else to fall or develop a habit which corroded their humanity, I encourage you, if possible, to contact them and ask forgiveness, then ask God to lift off of you the promised judgment of verse 2: *the millstone judgment*. To think it trivial is a sure sign your once-sensitive conscious is covered with thick layer of unfeeling callous.

In the old mob movies one of the ways to kill a gangland rival was to fit him with *cement bedroom shoes*. Put his feet in a crate, pour it full of concrete, wait for it to harden while the victim begs for his life, then drop him in the East River. Perhaps you saw the horrible scene in the movie *Amistad* when the slaves who could not be fed were chained to one another and then thrown over the edge with a heavy weight which pulled them to the depths of the Atlantic. It was hard to watch. And as horrible a fate as that would be, it is preferable for that to happen than to stand before God and explain why you led another vulnerable human being into some sin that damaged them, perhaps for the rest of their lives, the best example of which in our current times are drug dealers. Jesus calls the victims his *little ones*. If you understand the rage of a parent when they find that someone has led their child astray, you understand how God the Father feels about all his weak and naive kids.

Our influence matters, and as Christians it had better be for good and not evil, said Jesus, whose vivid language is meant to strike fear in the hearts of disciples, “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 stumble.” Temptation is everywhere. Count on it. But don’t be the source of someone else’s fall. Better you were dead today and crushed in the depths. This makes me wonder if occasionally God does not take someone out ahead of time for their salvation. Better to die before I corrupt someone than to have to face God and fumble with a useless explanation. At least it bears thinking about. At this point I suspect Peter and the others are looking at one another, “What have we gotten ourselves into?”

What they have gotten themselves into is a new family where brothers and sisters are to care for one another.⁸ If this temptation and sin stuff is really as pervasive and devious as Jesus suggests, I can’t fight it alone. I need help. I need someone to love me enough to confront me when a part of life is out of order. It’s usually Saint Lori, but someone else did it for me last week. They rebuked me. I was not aware of this issue, but they were and had the love to confront me. I thanked them, and now I’m working on it. We are deeper friends because of it.

This is rare in our day. Many will gossip about you, but few will say, “Brother or sister, we have to talk.” And so what happens? The church becomes an undisciplined mob where we pay the preacher to deliver pleasant messages and personal sin never gets challenged. “Take heed to *yourselves*,” said Jesus in verse 3, which is always the first step, but then comes step two, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Deep introspection followed by accurate correction and lavish forgiveness if repentance is forthcoming. God wants a church that cares about righteousness and a church that practices mercy. Both are signs of health, and the absence of either is a symptom of sickness in a body. Many want counseling; few want correction. So if no one has corrected you in a while, it tells me either you don’t have any true brothers and sisters who care, or else you’ve already attained a sinless life. Husbands and wives often do this for one another. It’s one of the advantages of being married to a believer. And in fact it can only be carried out by those who know you well. Which is why small groups are so essential to church health. Being an unconnected church member leaves you highly vulnerable. You can

⁸ For a full biblical and practical treatment, see Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009).

only have correction and deep healing to the same level that you have church love. If no one knows you, how can they help? The wolf seeks out the isolated member of the flock because they're so vulnerable. Is that you?

If I don't love you because I haven't taken time to know you, I don't care if you go down the tubes. But if you are my brother or sister in Christ, it pains me to see sin making a fool out of you, and so I first examine myself and then come to you in a private conversation. The early Methodists were known for this, which is one reason they were such a powerful force for evangelism in the early years.⁹ The weekly class meeting was a guaranteed occasion for accountability, correction, and forgiveness. It built spiritual muscle. But we have grown weak and flabby and unaccountable. Worst thing we ever did was to think the Sunday School could replace the weekly class meeting with its high accountability for behavioral change.¹⁰

What would happen to the health of Greenwood if doctors quit diagnosing disease? Tell everyone they're just fine. Community health would decline. Same with the church. Public sin is to be rebuked in private, called what it is, and if there is repentance, forgiveness and full restoration extended; and if there is no repentance—no change of mind and heart, forgiveness is withheld.¹¹ It was to future leaders, to the disciples, that Jesus gave this hard task. Pastors have to do this, and we have to be open to the same from others. We are not above anything, and the medicine we prescribe we must take ourselves. It's one of the great safeguards the Lord gives his church to protect it from serious corruption. And it applies to doctrinal as well as moral issues. A sharp and loving rebuke makes us aware of sin, and repentance is the path to restoration. This is not about meddling or being a policeman in someone else's life. Not about the invasion of privacy by the nosey. It's about obeying what Jesus taught and protecting the church from severe corruption and becoming the laughing stock of the world, which we now are in some places. The church has moral and doctrinal boundaries, and someone has to keep the fences repaired. It does not mean those who patrol the fence line are morally superior; it's simply their job for the common good. In our days the fences are crumbling, and the pasture gone to weeds.

⁹ For a recent review, see David Werner, "John Wesley's Questions: "How Is Your Doing?" *The Asbury Journal* 65, 2:268-293.

¹⁰ On the recovery of this prudential means of grace, see Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2014).

¹¹ The charge of the risen Jesus in John 20:23.

If you violate the law, we have to talk. If you incur debt without the intent of paying it off, we need to talk. If you are fornicating as a single or unfaithful as a spouse, we need to talk; I don't care how old you are. If you're a chronic gambler, we need to talk. If your marriage is failing, we need to talk. If you're using illegal drugs or smoking weed, we need to talk. If you're a gossip, we need to talk. If you don't give, we need to talk. If you're dabbling in the occult or other religions, we need to talk. If you despise people of another race, we need to talk. If you're a drunk, we need to talk. If you can't get free of something in your past, we need to talk. If you're cheating in business, we need to talk. If you're discouraged in the faith, we need to talk. If you've become spiritually lazy, we need to talk. We are in the business of helping heal one another of the disease of sin in all its symptoms, and if we don't use the medicines Jesus supplied, we have no reason to whine that the church is weak. We're not here to entertain. We're here to engage real people in real lives with a real Savior and a real fellowship where they can grow up in God. We are a factory where saints are formed out of sinners because of the tough, merciful love of Jesus Christ. This is hard, and why it's so ignored. When people say, "Pastor, I've never heard that before," my answer is always, "What book are you reading?"

2) The Faith Issue (vv. 5-6)

If this sermon makes you uncomfortable, congratulations! You are now in the company of the apostles! They didn't like it either. Jesus had spoken of a dangerous world, a death sentence for corrupting others, the responsibility to correct and show mercy no matter how many times people continue through the cycle of sin and repentance. Such an unconventional life takes God, and they knew it! "Lord, we need more faith. We don't have enough to carry this out!" Nothing like a good dose of truth from Jesus to make you feel totally inadequate!

"Yes," said Jesus, "it takes faith, but not what you think." Since faith is nothing other than an open, trusting relationship with God in which he takes the lead and we respond, even a little is enough to establish a connection strong enough to enable miracles. "Even faith as tiny as a mustard seed is enough to uproot the deep roots of the black mulberry and cast it into the sea." It doesn't take a big plug to access the full power resources of Duke Power. Just a little one! Plug it in!

There are many misunderstandings of faith. Some have *faith in faith* instead of faith in God. They try to work up faith and often equate it with an emotional state: the error of pietism. Others in the positive-mental-attitude camp have *faith in themselves* instead of faith in God: the error of self-help. Some in the Charismatic camp treat

faith as almost something magical which requires God to do their bidding. *Name it and claim it* theology: the error of presumption. But even the tiniest connection to the vast resources of the Living God is quite enough to deal with the sin issue in ourselves and the church. Jesus is not talking about tossing mulberry bushes in the Mediterranean; he's saying that trust in God, even the tiniest amount, is sufficient for loving one another in the way he requires so that sin is taken seriously and forgiveness even more so. Such a church is a spiritually and morally safe place to live. That is the kind of church I want to pastor. We watch out for one another. When you stumble, there are brothers and sister to pick you up and make sure you're restored without condemnation, a place where no one takes cheap shots from a seat of moral superiority. We fight sin and its effects together. Repentance is not something we have to fear or be ashamed about. It's normal. Sin makes us morally sleepy; rebuke wakes us up again. The disciples were wrong. We don't lack faith; what we lack is obedience. And here pastors are most culpable. We don't want you examining the sin and compromise in our lives, so we make a silent agreement with the church not to talk about it. We all agree to stay vague. God help us!

3) The "D" Word (vv. 7-10)

A hundred years from now our great grandchildren will read the history of our times and wonder how we could be so blind. Why weren't we tougher on the issue of tobacco which kills millions, or environmental pollution which poisons us all? Why were we so silent when marriages by the scores were coming apart and children left devastated? Why did we wink at abortion and how it changed the national character? Why were we so selective? I try to remember this future perspective whenever I read the history and peruse the sermons of southern preachers before the Civil War who defended slavery from the Scriptures. They were wrong, captive to the sins of their culture, and we now see it clearly in a way they could not.

But the same verdict will one day be passed on us. It's easy to see the sins of our ancestors, hard to see our own. Because Jesus used the master and slave analogy does not mean he approved the institution; the fact is he let loose a movement which eventually banned it. It was simply an apt analog for one aspect of our relationship to God. God is master; we are servants. We owe God obedience and have no right to expect extras when we do our duty. Now it would be wrong to press the analogy too far and portray God as a *slavedriver*; that was not Jesus' intent. God is our Father, but dealing with sin in ourselves and others is a part of our duty; it cannot be avoided without making the church something other than Jesus intended.

The question Jesus asked in verse 7 was laughable. If a man has only one slave, he must do double duty: farm and domestic work. No master would say, “You’ve worked hard. Sit down and let me serve you. Let’s change roles.”¹² It would never happen. The slave would fix the meal and eat afterwards. It was the structure of the relationship, and in such an arrangement you don’t get praised because you do what’s required. That’s how it was with masters and slaves in the ancient world, and our relationship with Jesus is a structured one in which he gives the orders. He own us! And that is our hope. There are no rewards outside the relationship itself.

It was then that Jesus used the dreaded *d* word, *duty*, of which Robert Edward. Lee said that it is “the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things,” he wrote. “You cannot do more; you should never wish to do less.”¹³ It’s not a popular word these days. It feels burdensome, as in KP duty, latrine duty, bus duty for teachers, jury duty for citizens. It doesn’t fit well with our cherished ideals of entertainment and entitlement, freedom and choice and self-determination. Duty is made no easier when the adjective *Christian* is attached. Doesn’t sound fun, does it? *Christian duty*. And yet Jesus did not hesitate to use the word and teach that when we have done all God requires, when we have taken heed to ourselves and not corrupted others, when we have rebuked the wayward and forgiven the repentant and allowed others so to love us, we are at *the minimum level*. We remain unworthy servants with nothing on our side of the ledger to bargain with our master: verse 10, “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” The idea we can do more than God requires and build up an account of good works to cover future misdeeds or requests is an illusion.¹⁴ We owe God everything; there are no brownie points.

Nothing we do ever puts God in our debt. You did not do God a favor by coming this morning; God did you a favor by giving you a place to hear his Holy Word read and proclaimed. It is we who are dependent on God, not God on us. God

¹² Precisely what Jesus did in 12:37.

¹³ Wells, *Inspiring*, 199.

¹⁴ On the Protestant rejection of *works of supererogation* and the merit system of medieval Catholic theology, see our *Article XI: “Of Works of Supererogation”* (BOD 2102: 66) which quotes Luke 7:10. For a theological treatment of this Article with Wesley brought over without change from the Anglican Thirty-nine, see Gerald Bray, *The Faith We Confess* (London, England: Latimer Trust, 2009), 82-84; John H. Rogers, *Essential Truths For Christians* (Blue Bell, PA: Classical Anglican Press, 2011), 299-305

never owes us. Whatever God gives is free grace, not obligation. I may ask God for a gift, but I can never attach a *because* and then list my good deeds. Charles Kingsley wrote, “There are two freedoms: the false freedom where a man is free to do *what he likes*, and the true where a man is free to do *what he ought*,” and our world loves the first and hates the second. Christian freedom is in order to do what we ought to do, then not complain about it. And if we are disciples, if we are apprentices learning life in his mold, then we live with the duties he assigns, one of which is to deal with sin in ourselves and one another without complaining, like a doctor who while healing others monitors his own hearth. To forgive seven times a day, to have faith for the impossible, to live a life of vigilance against sin: these are not extraordinary things but our most basic duties. These are the privileges and responsibilities of those who claim to follow Jesus Christ. And all our rewards are in him, in the relationship.

When you joined the church you made five promises: to serve with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness.¹⁵ How are you doing with your duties? My observation is that we’ve grown slack, and that if there’s blame to be spread around, start with us preachers. Dr. David Seamands once warned a group of seminary students, “The moment you answered the call to preach, you reduced your odds of going to heaven by at least fifty percent.”¹⁶ It was to his disciples, the leadership team, that Jesus spoke these hard words.

CONCLUSION

I confess I would be discouraged, even despairing after this sermon, except for one thing: the one who issued this teaching is the same one who died for us and rose for us and promised that his Spirit would always be with the church to keep us from forgetting his words and his ways. What he calls us to do, he enables us to do together. So remember: first, that temptation is everywhere and every day until you die and are removed from the battle; second, that it is a double sin to corrupt another person; third, that we are to watch out for and watch over one another in tough and forgiving love; and finally, that doing our duty to God is the sweetest and safest place in the universe. It’s what it means to call Jesus *Lord*. We need him to rule over us.

¹⁵ *U.M. Hymnal*: 38.

Quoted in Stephen Martyn, “A shortcut to hell: Red Flag Warnings For Ministers,” *Challenge To Evangelism Today*, Spring 2000, 9.
