

February 12, 2023

MORE INSTRUCTIONS FOR DISCIPLES
Luke 17:1-19
(2 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

The gospels can be enjoyable to study because they are action-packed. In one chapter Jesus is healing and working miracles, in another he's confronting the Pharisees, in another he's teaching through parables that can be both insightful and challenging, but one thing that it seems we keep coming back to again and again throughout our study of the gospel of Luke are moments when Jesus turns to his disciples and simply instructs them in what it looks like to be a follower of Christ. Because these moments repeat themselves throughout Luke's gospel, you could look through our series so far and see that I've titled sermons: "Basics in Discipleship," "Jesus' Discipleship of the Twelve," and "The Nature of Following Jesus." And in the text we're looking at this morning we find that Jesus is once more turning to address his disciples in what it looks like to be a follower of Christ, and so I've cleverly titled this sermon, "More Instructions for Disciples."

But we need these repeated moments of Jesus' instructing us in what it looks like to follow him because we're prone to forget some of the basics of discipleship, and sadly it may be that we're prone to forget them because we choose to neglect them. We've noted many times that we do not drift toward holiness. It takes disciplined effort to ensure that we're walking in obedience to the commands of Jesus. And so as we turn to Luke 17:1-19 this morning, we're reminded once more of some basic realities that should characterize us as followers of Christ. I'll put them under four headings as we walk through the text this morning, and the first is: The need for holiness.

The need for holiness

After having just looked at the Pharisees, their love of money, and their rebellion against the Lord, culminating in a parable where the rich man is in a place of eternal torment, it shouldn't be surprising to see the very next thing on Jesus' lips is a warning about the need for holiness. But specifically note how Jesus speaks of our pursuit of holiness in a *corporate* way. That is to say, he speaks of us fighting sin and pursuing holiness as a group, within a community, that is, as the church. Luke writes, "And he said to his disciples, 'Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 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' (vv. 1-2).

Jesus starts with the obvious—in this world there'll be temptations. Temptations are all around us. If you drive by a house that is nicer than yours, you can be presented with the temptation to covet. If someone were to offer you illegal drugs, then that would be a temptation to sin by taking illegal drugs. Jesus acknowledges that these realities will be in the world. But after acknowledging the reality of temptations that will come to us, he warns us against being the

means of temptation to another. That is, he warns us against doing anything that would tempt another brother or sister to sin. He stresses the seriousness of this by telling us that it would be better to have a huge stone hung around your neck and cast into the sea than to cause a little one to stumble.

Now, let's address a few issues here. First, when Jesus refers to the "little ones," he's not referring to children. This is simply a term he uses for believers. He's warning us against leading another brother or sister in Christ to sin. Second, if we want to understand why it would be better to drown in this horrendous way than to cause someone else to sin, simply consider what we just saw in our last parable at the end of chapter 16. Sin can take us down a path that leads to eternal torment. Remember the rich man hoping simply for a drop of water on his tongue. Once you have that image in your head, it makes sense to think, "I'd rather die a horrendous death than be a means of leading someone toward eternal torment." And, third, the means that Jesus gives us to keep from leading someone else to sin is seen in the opening words of verse 3 as he declares, "Pay attention to yourselves!"

So let's put this together. One key reason why you and I need to watch how we live, ensuring that we're chasing after righteousness instead of sin is because our words and actions can influence others. And if a brother or sister in Christ sees you sinning, it may well communicate to them that it's okay to do likewise and lead them down a path that leads away from Christ. Therefore, as a believer who is brought into the church of Christ, you can no longer live your life, thinking that you are unattached to others. We are responsible for the influence we have on others, and we need to be the kind of people that stir another up to good words rather than one who influences another toward sin.

So pay attention to yourselves, Jesus tells us. Watch what you say because this is the kind of speech you're condoning. Watch what you look at to see what kinds of things you're suggesting are okay to look at. Instead of being one who suggests to others that it's okay to gossip because they see you gossiping, you want to be one who influences others to speak honorably of others because they see you doing it and are drawn to holiness. So, we fight for holiness—not just for ourselves but for the church—by paying attention to how we're living and making sure we're influencing others towards godliness and not sin.

But that's not the only necessary element in our pursuit of holiness. Jesus adds in verse 3, "If your brother sins, rebuke him." Now, I want to stop there for a second so that we don't move past this element too quickly. Jesus not only envisions you and I keeping watch on how we're influencing others but he also encourages us to rebuke others if they're sinning. Of course, this doesn't mean that we enter every conversation looking for an opportunity to pounce on someone who says something they shouldn't or the like. Rather, the picture is that we love each other enough to go to the person if he or she is walking in sin.

Let me give you an example. Imagine a brother speaks harshly to his wife. This is simply his way of conversation, and others see it. One thing you could do is not love enough to care how this affects this brother, his wife, or others who may be influenced by him. That's often how we've

convinced ourselves that the church should be, right? Mind your own business. But that's selfish. Another wrong path we could go down is to go to others and talk about how our brother speaks harshly to his wife. But that's gossip. Now, you're only adding your sin to the situation. And it isn't okay to go to another and say, "Pray for our brother. Do you see how harshly he speaks to his wife?" That's simply dressing up gossip as a prayer request, but it's still gossip. Rather, the thing to do is to love your brother enough to go to him and lovingly and gently—assuming the best of him ("Brother, I'm sure this isn't your intention . . .)—point out that he's speaking to his wife in a manner that doesn't honor Christ or his wife. Then (if he repents) say nothing about it to anyone else so that the brother doesn't bear unnecessary humiliation. That's the path Jesus commands, and no doubt we've all been guilty of failing to love our Lord and our brothers or sisters by disobeying Jesus here.

Then, Jesus adds another element. When our brother repents, we forgive him. Jesus says, "And if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (vv. 3b-4). Jesus shoots down the idea that we ever have the right to say, "Well, I've forgiven you enough; I cannot extend any more forgiveness." He uses the picture of forgiving someone seven times in a day and you forgiving him seven times. And this carries weight when we realize that "seven" is a picture of wholeness or completeness. In other words, Jesus isn't suggesting that we don't forgive on the eighth time. He's suggesting that we keep forgiving again and again.

Now, no doubt there might be occasions where we need to make sure someone understands repentance. If someone steals from you seven times in a day, claiming to repent seven times, it's worth having a conversation in which you explain that repentance involves actually not wanting to do this action again and being willing to put things in place to keep it from happening. But what Jesus recognizes is that when we live our lives tightly knit to one another, experiencing the day-in and day-out realities of this world, there are going to be plenty of times that we sin against each other. And each time, when one repents, it is mandated that the other forgives. There is no category of a believer—who has been forgiven so much by Christ—not forgiving another who repents.

And so the first thing Jesus teaches us about being his disciples is that we must pursue holiness corporately. We keep watch on ourselves to make sure we don't influence any others toward sin. In love and gentleness we rebuke our brothers or sisters when they sin. And we eagerly forgive when one repents. Second, we see the power of faith.

The power of faith

It seems that the disciples' response to Jesus' words were to feel overwhelmed. Perhaps they thought of ways they've been hurt by another and felt that it would be impossible to live a life where they kept forgiving people who sinned against them and hurt them repeatedly. Therefore, they think they surely need something more in order to do this, and so they say to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" (v. 6).

Jesus' response to this is interesting. Luke writes, "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'" (v. 6). And once more we probably need to orient ourselves to this setting in order to catch what Jesus is saying. Commentators will tell you that a mulberry tree had a "proverbially extensive and deep root system."¹ Just like we might reference an oak tree to symbolize something that's stable and unmoving, they'd reference a mulberry tree as something impossible to uproot and move. So, Jesus is suggesting that only a tiny bit of faith is necessary for doing that which seems impossible.

But it's right at this point where I think we can get off on the wrong foot. We might hear something like this (or that faith can move mountains), and all of the sudden we're thinking about whether we can move a tree or a mountain, and that becomes our focus. But if we go there, we're missing the point. Jesus doesn't use this example so that his disciples might run out and try to uproot and move mulberry trees. He is using this example say that what they feel like is impossible—like repeatedly forgiving another—they're actually equipped to do.

That's why he speaks of faith "like a grain of mustard seed." He's saying that their issue isn't that they need the Lord to infuse them with more and more faith or else they'll never be able to obey his commands. He's saying, "The size or amount of faith doesn't matter." What matters is the presence of saving faith, period.

If we have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then our God has equipped us and empowered us through his Spirit to obey his word. If you've convinced yourself that you need something more—like a greater experience or a greater gift of faith or the like—in order to walk in obedience to Jesus, you've simply bought into something that isn't true. All those who have saving faith have been set free from the bondage to sin and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk in obedience to all that Christ commands—even when his commands seem as difficult as continually forgiving one who has hurt you. So do not believe the devil's lies that you can't walk away from that pattern of chasing your lusts or giving into your anger or withholding forgiveness from the one who has hurt you. If you belong to Christ, you are able to obey. Saving faith not only brings forgiveness of our sins but the transforming power to obey Christ's commands. And this brings us to our third heading: the expectation of obedience.

The expectation of obedience

Here's what I mean by this heading: it is not something extraordinary but simply the expectation that a disciple of Jesus obeys what Jesus commands. Just like we wouldn't call our neighbors to tell them that our dog barked because it's just it's nature to do so, so Jesus is saying that it's the normal expectation that his disciples obey. It shouldn't be seen as spectacular.

¹ David Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 681.

Let me show this to you in the text. Jesus asks, “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?” The answer is, “Of course not. He’s just doing his job. And so Jesus adds, “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’” (vv. 7-10).

Jesus’ point is clear enough. If you have a servant, and the servant has done what he’s supposed to do in the field, he doesn’t then merit anything special. He’s just doing what he’s supposed to do. Jesus then tells us that this is the category we are in as his followers. We are unworthy servants that the Lord has shown grace to, and when we do what we’re commanded it is simply our duty.

Now, what’s odd about this is that Jesus suggests it would be odd for the servant to come in from working in the field and the master say, “Come at once and recline at table” when he actually has used this very imagery earlier in 12:37. There, he said that that when he—the master—comes and finds his servants being faithful when he returns, “He will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.” So, Jesus isn’t saying that we aren’t objects of grace that sounds too good to be true as followers of Jesus. Absolutely we are. I said when preaching 12:37, “Jesus is saying that the blessing that will come to God’s children at his coming is so glorious that it’s beyond comprehension—like a master taking on the role of a servant and serving them.” Obviously we are the objects of grace and blessing. Jesus isn’t suggesting otherwise.

But he is suggesting that there’s, therefore, no room for pride or arrogance as we faithfully obey Jesus. We’re not doing anything spectacular when we serve our master. We’re simply doing our duty. And so we obey humbly, graciously, and gratefully—which brings us to our last heading—the need for gratefulness.

The need for gratefulness

This section ends with a story that can feel out of place but that adds one more element to our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem when he passes by ten lepers. Now, leprosy was a skin disease where the one suffering from the disease would have to distance himself from others, lest he contaminate them with this dreaded disease. He’d even need to announce himself when approaching a group so that they might be aware and seek even greater distance from him. Obviously it was a terrible disease. And this is why Luke tells us that as Jesus was met by these ten lepers, they “stood at a distance” (v. 12).

But they didn’t stand at a distance just to observe Jesus. They cried out together, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (v. 13). And Jesus did. He told them to go show themselves to the priests. The reason for this is because the priest was given the job of diagnosing skin diseases in Israel, and only he could pronounce one clean. That’s why when you’re reading through

Leviticus and you get to chapters 13-14, there's all kinds of instructions about what to look for in certain skin diseases. Moses parses out what is okay and what isn't, which brings us to one of the funnier sections in the Bible when Moses says, "If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald; he is clean. And if a man's hair falls out from his forehead, he has baldness of the forehead; he is clean" (Lev 13:40-41). So, if I had gone to a Levitical priest, he might say, "I've got good news and bad news. You don't have leprosy, but you have increasing thinning of the forehead as well as baldness on the crown of your head."

Anyway, as the lepers are on their way to the priest, they're all of the sudden cleansed of their leprosy. And one of them, realizing he was clean, turns back, praises God, runs back to Jesus, falls at his feet, and thanks him. And Luke notes that he's a Samaritan, adding an element of surprise to the story since Jews thought very lowly of Samaritans.

But the punchline of the story comes as Jesus says to the Samaritan, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (v. 18). And then Jesus adds, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (v. 19).

The lesson is obviously for us. After all, it's easy for us to judge these men and declare how grateful they should be the rest of their lives. I mean, think of what a difference it makes that they were now healed of leprosy. They could be among people again. They could hug those whom they loved. And on and on. And yet we're supposed to see this put ourselves in their shoes—except that our situation was worse and our blessing greater.

We were dead in our sins under the judgment of God, awaiting the day when we would be like that rich man at the end of Luke 16, in eternal torment. And instead, Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, rose from the dead, and opened our eyes to repent of our sins and believe in him so that we're forgiven and have eternal life as beloved children of God. That's more than life-changing. Our eternity has been altered from one extreme to the other. And so if we're shocked that only one of these lepers was overwhelmed by gratefulness, how much more should we be surprised to find any Christian who isn't overwhelmed by gratefulness throughout each moment of our lives? No matter what this life brings, if you're trusting in Christ, heaven is your eternal home. That should impact how grateful we are through all of life's circumstances.

So, what does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus? We pursue holiness, personally and corporately. We pay attention to our lives so that as we influence others it's toward holiness. We pursue our brothers and sisters in love as they walk into sin, calling them to turn, and forgiving them when they repent. We realize that if our faith is in Christ, we have all we need to obey. We're no longer slaves to sin, and so we submit ourselves as slaves of righteousness. And as we obey, we do not feel puffed up as if we're doing something impressive. Rather, we recognize that we're merely doing what any servant of Christ should do. And we're overwhelmed with a constantly grateful heart that we even get to be servants of the one who redeemed us. So, let's thank God this morning that we belong to him and ask him to aid us so that we might walk in a way that's pleasing to him as we come to the table. Amen.