

- Today we turn to a passage in Luke that focuses on the character and nature of the relationships among and between believers...this isn't prophetic, or historical, or parabolic, it's the sort of practical teaching from Jesus that permeates the gospels...Jesus spoke this to His disciples, and it's equally valuable for the church in our day, with a message I believe is a needed corrective for our times...in our culture, and around the world, we are surrounded by a pervasive attitude of pride, arrogance, conceit, and selfishness...from chest-thumping professional athletes to shamelessly self-promoting politicians, and your average citizen, too...the dominant idol of our day is self – self-exaltation, self-love, and self-righteousness ...humanity ignores God's warning in **James 4.6** that **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”** ...instead, most people choose to pursue the unholy trinity in **I John 2.16: the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the boastful pride of life— which is not from the Father but is from the world.** ...if ever we needed to be reminded by God's word of our desperate need for humility, it's now...
- The Gospel of Luke, chapter 17, the first ten verses isn't one of the best-known NT passages, but it does emphasize the critical importance of humility...and it reinforces the preceding passage at the end of chapter 16, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus...in that parable, Jesus condemns the pride of the rich man, a Pharisee-like figure, as he dies and awakens in hell, and is shocked to discover that the humble, destitute beggar whom the arrogant rich man ignored in life now rests in Abraham's bosom...the parable and this teaching are the exhortation of Jesus to compassion, care, faith, and humility, to seek after the grace of God and reject the self-righteousness of the Pharisees...in other words, to live “anti-Pharisee” lives...
- I hope that as we examine this text, we'll realize the indispensable nature of Christian humility...as we think about this together, along the way we'll identify marks that are signs of humility in the hearts of believers...

Don't give offense

¹ And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!" ² 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.

- Remember, this is spoken to the twelve and the other disciples following Jesus...so we should see this as meant for us, too...
- Let's define something here: what exactly is a temptation? The Greek word is 'skandalon,' the source of our English word, 'scandal,'...here, it's a noun meaning "a cause for stumbling"...to put it clearly, temptation is an enticement to sin... in his treatise "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers," the Puritan reformer John Owen defines it this way: Temptation, then, in general, is any thing, state, way, or condition that, upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience, which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatever.¹
- Jesus is right, of course...temptations will come, for that is the way of our enemy to engage with us and seduce us, to use Owen's word, to depart from the Lord and embrace sinful disobedience...
- There are two warnings here: the obvious first one is to be on the lookout for temptations in your own life...when they come, we need not fall into them, for Jesus provides the means to resist...the devil doesn't make us sin; we make that choice ourselves...thank the Lord He provides a way of escape, as we read in **I Corinthians 10.13**...
- Here, the warning for the disciples is to not be the one who is the tempter...as Jesus says, **woe to the one through whom they come!** The phrase "little ones" can mean children, but it can also (and probably does here) mean new believers, who are still vulnerable to following a poor example of those who have been in the faith for a longer time...

¹ John Owen, [The Works of John Owen](#), ed. William H. Goold, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 96.

- Is it possible that a Christian could be a cause of temptation for another Christian? Sadly, yes...through careless gossip leading others to join in, through a lack of diligence in service prompting others to quit or fail in their commitments as well, or by boasting of our accomplishments in a way that discourages the efforts of other believers...and the consequences are extremely severe...something worse than drowning with a millstone tied to your neck!
- Paul gives us an example in **I Corinthians 8** in his discussion about eating meat sacrificed to idols...he warns the Corinthians: ⁹ **But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.** Paul's conclusion limits Christian liberty in the interests of the "weaker" brother: ¹² **Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.** Paul understood the teaching of Jesus – go out of your way, even to the point of limiting your own freedom, in order to avoid giving offense to a weaker brother...don't allow your actions in relation to fellow believers to be a temptation to sin...
- So the first mark of humility is this: Don't give offense...don't let your desire to exercise your liberty cause another brother or sister to falter in their faith when he or she sees your example...reject your own freedom in favor of the best interests of others...in **Romans 14 and 15**, Paul summarizes the point: ¹³ **Therefore let us...decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ...We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.**

Rebuke sinning believers

³ **Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him,**

- This instruction might seem to be an odd way to live humbly in the body of Christ, but let's look more closely...
- First, Jesus tells the disciples to **Pay attention to yourselves!** Paul emphasizes this same imperative when he tells those who are about to take the Lord's Supper to "examine yourselves"...before you step into the task of rebuking a fellow believer, carefully look at your own life...hear the words of Jesus in **Matthew 7.3-5** in the Sermon on the Mount:

³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
- Resolving to follow this command and rebuke a brother for his sin, whether or not it was committed personally against you, may sound as if you are taking a position of moral superiority, but consider this: what I believe actually happens in these difficult situations, when they are done in humility, is that the rebuking believer comes alongside the sinning believer not as a judge, but as a fellow Christian, encouraging the sinning believer to humbly join him under the authority of the word of God...this is a way to lead another back to Christ, from the position of being a servant, but speaking from the Scriptures...
- I was once approached by a friend to pray with him before he rebuked another believer for known sin...my friend, Tim, came over, and I've rarely seen a more burdened man...we knelt on the floor and Tim began to pray, silently and aloud, for more than an hour...I prayed as well, but it was Tim's heart that was heavy and he needed to pray before taking on this task that he, frankly, did not wish to take on...as I've reflected on that moment, that became a good example of attending to oneself, then approaching a sinning brother...I saw the key points of obeying this command: it must be done scripturally, courageously, gently, lovingly, prayerfully, and above all, humbly...this lives out the truth of **Ephesians 4.15:** ¹⁵...

speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

- So the second mark of humility is this: rebuke sinning believers, but only after rigorously examining your own life, seeking out and repenting of your own sin, and much prayer... then, and only then, speak with your brother or sister in Christ...

Don't take offense

and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

- This admonition might be a little tougher than the first two, for our hearts can become hard when we believe we have been wronged or offended...but nevertheless, Jesus is clear when He says we must forgive a repentant brother, even for repeated offenses...and we need to know that there's more at stake than just personal relationships...**Matthew 6.14-15:** ¹⁴**For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,** ¹⁵**but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.** The context here is the model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount...the first thing Jesus emphasized after the prayer is this verse on forgiveness...if we relate to others with a heart of unforgiveness, that hard heart disrupts our relationship to the Lord...in **Matthew 18.21** and following, Jesus tells us about the importance of forgiveness in a parable aptly named the parable of the unforgiving servant...I encourage you to read that
- This is why it's a great idea to forgive others even if they do not or cannot repent...it's always best to cultivate a heart of forgiveness toward others, for the benefit of others and ourselves...
- That said, this passage certainly doesn't exclude effective Christian counsel or personal accountability or even church discipline, depending on the circumstances, but those issues

aren't part of the teaching here – this passage emphasizes, rightly, that our basic task as believers is to forgive, whether it's once, seven times a day, or seventy times seven...the hard truth is this: no Christian is permitted to hold a grudge in anger and bitterness...it will ruin our relationships with others and with the Lord, and I think, long term, we harm only ourselves if we dwell on old hurts and wounds we've suffered...it's far better, isn't it, to take those things to the Lord in prayer, turn them over to Him, and let them go...

- A quick question here: is this difficult for you? Do you find it hard to forgive others when you think they've harmed you? Do you struggle to ask others for forgiveness? How much better it is to keep no record of wrongs, to release the bitterness...try it...
- That's the third mark of humility: don't take offense...be quick to not notice wrongs done to you, and equally quick to forgive others, even taking the initiative if needed

Exercise your faith

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶And 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.

- At this point, the apostles might be thinking that to obey Jesus's first three commands about relationships with others, they needed more faith...but as He often did, Jesus didn't directly reply, but instead turned their thoughts to the faith they already had...
- He immediately reframes the question from a "less v. more" issue to the possibility of what God could do through a person if their faith was, figuratively, the size of a mustard seed...a mustard seed is so small that if I had one here, you couldn't see it, so I found a photo of one...
- What might one do with mustard-seed faith? In a parabolic style, Jesus says you could tell a mulberry tree to rip itself out of the earth by the roots, fly to the ocean, and plant itself...

this isn't something Jesus Himself would do...He refused to do spectacular sign miracles when the Pharisees demanded them, but the point here is that it doesn't take a lot of faith to have a tremendous effect...

- Why? Many of us (I certainly have) prayed the prayer of the father of the sick child in **Mark 9.24**, ²⁴ **Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"** I think all of us would want more faith, stronger faith...but as Jesus pointed out, the issue isn't how much faith we have...the real issue is this: in Whom have we placed our faith? Is our faith in ourselves? God help us if we are the object of our faith...no one is more lost than a person who is trusting in himself or herself for life, death, and eternal salvation...it's equally foolish to somehow place our faith in faith...if I just believe strongly enough, my faith will save me, without regard for its object...no, we must, as Jesus says in **Mark 11.22**, **"Have faith in God.**
- Step one in this command of Jesus is to realize that we don't need great faith in God – we need faith in a great God...it's not about a mustard seed versus a mulberry tree, it's simply this: place your faith in God...trust Jesus Christ...placing your faith in anyone or anything else is a fatal mistake...only Jesus saves...**Acts 4.12** says ¹² **And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."** ...trust in God!
- One more reminder: it isn't as much about having faith as it is about exercising it...it's easy to say you have faith, it's harder to work out that faith day after day, year after year, in difficult situations with people, when jobs are lost and frightening diagnoses come your way, in plenty and in want...perhaps we don't need more faith, but we need to more courageously exercise the faith we have...

- What does this have to do with humility, you ask? It requires humility, doesn't it, to reject a self-directed, self-promoted life, and acknowledge that none of us are God, and to place your faith in Jesus? I think so...arrogant, proud, ego-driven people rarely receive the gift of faith in God, mostly because their faith is already solidly resting on themselves...it takes humility to trust your life to another, even God...
- That's the fourth mark of humility: exercise your faith in Jesus...trust in Him, run to Him, believing that He will do all that is needful for you...

Don't desire recognition

“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’? ⁸Will 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’? ⁹Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

- The first time you hear this, it might sound harsh...but we have to ask ourselves, “What is our role in this life relative to God?”
- There are many answers to that question: friend, joint heir with Jesus, citizen of heaven, saint, rescued sinner...but the one that comes to the foreground here is the Greek word ‘doulos,’ which many of you are familiar with...the ESV translates it as ‘servant’ but the definition of it is “a person who is legally owned by someone else and whose entire livelihood and purpose was determined by their master”...
- Anyone owning a ‘doulos,’ a slave, would likely not relate to that person as Jesus describes in verse seven through nine...the master would probably not call the slave in from his work to serve the slave dinner...in fact, as verse nine notes, the slave generally wasn't thanked

for their service, much less rewarded...when Jesus asks His disciples if they would treat a slave the way this text describes, the assumed answer is “no”...

- I think our struggle begins with this: this passage confronts us with a biblical truth we don't often consider: that every believer is truly a doulos, a bondservant, of the Lord, along with the apostle Paul, who begins many of his letters by introducing himself as a doulos, a slave, of Jesus Christ...
- The world rejects this perspective...but sadly, even many Christians have a higher view of themselves and a lower or insufficient view of God, instead of the other way around...we sometimes might think that all our service for the Lord places the Almighty God in our debt, that He needs us and should be grateful we serve Him...the truth is that God never owes us anything, and any rewards or blessings that come our way from the Lord are purely from His gracious heart, as we see in **Luke 12.35-37**...
- This is how the gospel must transform the human heart...when we come to Jesus, we seek only His approval and we give up the futile pursuit of human approval and recognition, even within the church...as a friend once reminded me, every believer lives his or her life for an audience of One...
- The point Jesus is making here is intended to teach the disciples humility...that they are to be different from the Pharisees...those who belong to the Lord are to be characterized not by worldly pride, but by godly humility...as believers, we have a new Master, and our lives are governed by the truth of **Colossians 3.23-24**: ²³ **Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,** ²⁴ **knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.**
- The word “unworthy” seems troubling, but a better translation in this context would be “unprofitable”...our work for God does not profit Him, gain something for Him that He

lacked, for one of the attributes of God is that He needs nothing...it is we who need Him, His love, grace, and mercy...

- One final thought: sometimes we falsely assume that humility means thinking less of ourselves...instead, it means thinking of ourselves less...the gospel and true humility shift our focus from ourselves to God and to others...the flesh will fight you on this, but don't give in to it...keep turning your focus back to Jesus and others...
- That's the fifth mark of humility: don't desire the recognition or approval of the world, but instead look only to our gracious God and Father...

Application

- I realize this is a message counter to our culture, but it should land differently for those who know Jesus, for if we are serious about walking with Him, then we have to reckon with truths like **Romans 8.29**: that we are to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, who tells us Himself that He is **gentle and lowly in heart (Matthew 11.28-29)**...being like Jesus means we are different from the world...Jesus shows us this difference even when it's hard, as when He washed the apostles' feet and said, ¹³ **You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.** Jesus exemplified radical humility, and we see it most clearly in His death on the cross... **Philippians 2.5-8**: ⁵ **Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**
- So when Jesus tells us to live humbly, He's telling us to follow Him, to imitate Him...to never place stumbling blocks before others, to compassionately help lead others back from sin, to

not take offense but to quickly forgive and never hold a grudge, to have and exercise faith in our Almighty God, and to serve as unto Christ without seeking recognition from others... the final question is this: will we follow Him where He leads?