



Catalog No. 1957

Luke 17:1–10

57th Message

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April 27, 2014

# KEEPING COMMUNITIES SAFE AND FLOURISHING

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Since 9/11 the issue of “safety” has taken on global proportions, from sporting events like the Boston Marathon, to elementary schools like Sandy Hook, or entire nations like Syria and now the Ukraine. How do we keep our communities, our cities and our nation safe so that everyone can flourish as God intended? This is the topic Jesus addresses in our text today. In an interlude between two conversations with the Pharisees, Jesus instructs his disciples on their future role as shepherds and as God’s bearers of light in the world. After his departure, they will be charged with the difficult task of forging new communities in the midst of a politically oppressive, violent and licentious world. What advice will Jesus give to help them keep their fledgling communities safe and, at the same time, flourishing?

The wisdom that Jesus gives is utterly profound and stands in stark contrast to the ways of Israel’s religious leaders. Though the lessons are brief and seem straightforward on the surface, Jesus makes use of some striking metaphors with a parable that invites deeper reflection in order to unravel their hidden truths.

## I. Constant Care for the Vulnerable

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. Pay attention to yourselves!” (Luke 17:1–3a ESV)

Of the many sublime attributes of Israel’s God, the one that he insisted his people never lose sight of was his compassion. It is God’s outrageous compassion, not his judgment, that would lead the nations to repentance. This has been the holy ground that Jesus has been contesting for against the Pharisees in the previous parables of the Prodigal Son and the rich man and Lazarus. The litmus test of the spiritual health of a community is how it cares for what Jesus affectionately calls “the little ones.” The term refers to those who are defenseless and vulnerable, and therefore need special care and protection from those who might exploit them.

In Luke’s gospel it includes not only children and those who are young in their faith, but also the multitudes of outcasts—the sick, the diseased, the demon possessed, the widows, the destitute and the foreigners—all those Jesus was freely welcoming into the kingdom, the very ones the Pharisees had erected strict boundary lines to shut out.

The value God places on these “little ones” is seen in the graphic and extreme imagery that Jesus uses to describe the judgment reserved for those who cause them to stumble. The phrase “temptations to sin” is the Greek word *skandala* (English: scandal), which was derived “from a root meaning snap shut, was originally the piece of wood that kept open a trap for animals.” Thus it came to mean a “snare to destroy a person... or to cause him to sin.”<sup>1</sup> Because sin is

universal and pervasive, Jesus explains that is impossible to insulate a community or even your home from evil’s lures. But be warned, as John Carroll comments,

Although sources of stumbling and failure (*skandala*) are unavoidable, this does not let the one who does the damage off the hook. Better by far to be thrown into the sea with a heavy stone around one’s neck than to be the cause of stumbling (or falling, *skandalizein*) of “one of these little ones.”<sup>2</sup>

The imagery is designed to shock us out of our lethargy and indifference, and to provide a glimpse into God’s heart for those to whom we so often turn a blind eye. To a Jew the phrase “cast into the sea” evoked as much emotion as when we sing “the land of the free” at the climax our Star Spangled Banner. After their miraculous deliverance from the hands of Pharaoh in the Exodus, the children of Israel sang,

Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea,  
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

The floods covered them;

they went down into the depths like a stone.

You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;

they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

The LORD will reign forever and ever (Exod 15:4–5, 10, 18)

God cast Pharaoh’s army into the sea because that’s what Pharaoh did with Israel’s newborn sons. To be “cast into the sea” became a celebrated symbol for what happens to those who use their power to oppress the weak. To be “cast into the sea” with a “millstone” hung around your neck amplifies the thought.

Death by a millstone was reminiscent of the fate of one of the most violent and ruthless judges, Abimelech, who slaughtered 70 of his brothers on one stone to remove any opposition to his reign. It was only fitting that he was killed by a woman who “threw an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull” (Judg 9:53). The image also finds its way into the book of Revelation symbolizing the destruction of Babylon (Rev 18:21). Imagine yourself at the bottom of the sea forever chained to a millstone, whose massive weight was intended to crush grain to feed the poor, but now has crushed you. The lesson is obvious.

In Jesus’ day the Jews were hoping that Isaiah’s promise of a second and greater Exodus would result in a similar fate for the cruel and oppressive Romans. But Jesus turns the image on its head and applies it to the Pharisees, who are responsible for untold damage upon the “little ones” with all their rules. As Carroll concludes,

Care for others is not restricted to the community of believers but is to be extended to all who are low in status, to the little and young, a prominent concern in this Gospel. Thus the admonition is strong: Pay especially close attention to the way you relate to the vulnerable. Be on the alert!<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, John says “Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling” (1 John 2:10).

## II. The Mandate for Magnanimous Mercy

**Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, 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. (17:3–4)**

Jesus shifts the focus to our personal responsibility to remain vigilant so that we don’t become the cause of another’s stumbling, to our corporate responsibility to address the hurtful actions of others with honest and direct confrontation, followed by limitless mercy. Jesus’ instructions are similar to what God commanded in the book of Leviticus.

**Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (Lev 19:16–18 TNIV)**

If you’ve been wronged, nip it in the bud. “Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.” Don’t mull it over and let it fester and allow it to escalate into anger. Paul exhorts us, “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:26–27).

Anger is an open invitation for the devil to come alongside you and be your advocate. At night he’ll invade your sleep and put your subconscious into overdrive, replaying the tapes over and over in an imaginary kangaroo court, where you play the innocent victim, the prosecutor, the judge and the jury. It doesn’t take long before the tapes continue to run into the light of day. And at just the most inopportune time, someone asks you an innocent question and all of your pent up emotions are unleashed in a litany of vile slander...and then it goes viral and it’s World War III. And now the damage is too painful to deal with, so you go to another church, or worse yet, you start our own church, or you give up and quit going to church at all. It is so hard to let go of our pride and admit that we have been hurt. But it’s vital to the health of the body. Jesus says healing a broken relationship takes precedence over worship.

Now I am sensitive to the fact that some of you come from cultures where confrontation and rebuke is considered disrespectful or even taboo. And I suspect that most of you grew up in homes, like I did, where you were not encouraged to give voice to the pain or hurt that others had caused. The problem this creates is that powerful people are never confronted with their hurtful ways, and can go a lifetime controlling, manipulating, and even abusing people. And when they are Christians, it is God’s reputation that is sacrificed.

You have to make up your mind that being a follower of Christ takes precedence over your culture and family values. And the truth that trumps everything else is that everyone, whether young or old, male or female, has been made in God’s image and therefore has infinite value. This means our feelings count. This is why Jesus uses the term “brother” (or sister), which emphasizes our equality and the relational bonds of love that bind us together in God’s family.

But speaking the truth in love is only the beginning. If the person owns their guilt and repents, you must forgive them. So far so good,

but how should we address persistent sin? Jesus says it doesn’t matter how many times the individual falls, if he or she comes to you seven times in one day and says “I repent,” you must forgive him.

The implications of this are too much for the disciples to swallow. I have never experienced anyone asking me to forgive them twice in one day, let alone seven. You would have to be a naïve fool not to question the individual’s motivation and authenticity of repentance, not to mention the risk of making yourself vulnerable to be hurt once again. I can think of plenty of situations where a victim of abuse has remained in an unhealthy relationship because she was manipulated by false promises of her abuser. Instead of confronting the problem, her misguided trust further escalated the abuse and her enslavement. Given Jesus’s passion for the weak and vulnerable, he can’t have this manipulative situation in mind.

As I spent several weeks reflecting on this verse, it suddenly dawned on me that Jesus is asking us to do for others what God does for us. How many times do I drift off course every day? Seven would be a record low! For the 47 years I’ve been a follower of Jesus, how many times have I fallen into the same besetting sins—lust, pride and slander—over and over again? In God’s eyes a thousand years is a day, and a day a thousand years. Not once in 47 years when I returned to God to confess my sin, did he pull away and distance himself from me, like the older brother did to the prodigal son. Not once did I hear him say, “That’s enough Morgan. I’m through getting hurt by your broken promises and lack of consistency.”

Instead he welcomes me back with full acceptance and lavish love through the blood of his Son, and the life of his Spirit is instantly available for whatever task I have at hand. There are no judgment police to cross-examine me; there is no trial period to win back his trust; and no penance to perform. I am instantly a son again. In the same way our community must be characterized by magnanimous mercy, giving “support and encouragement to those who stood previously rebuked, so that the love of the community for those who seek to honor God is evident.”<sup>4</sup>

The mark of a healthy community is one where all its members take responsibility for the spiritual life of the community; one where the truth is spoken in love; and one that believes the best about others, being quick to forgive their faults and encouraging them in the full acceptance that belongs to those who are in Christ.

## III. The Faith Factor: A Global Vision

**The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” 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.” (17:5–6 ESV)**

In a rare moment of humility and sober recognition of their inadequacy to do the impossible, the apostles step forward in the company of disciples and request that Jesus increase their faith. Jesus’ response picks up the image of the sea from verse 2, and creates a new and unusual metaphor that is intended to expand their horizons beyond what they think is possible. The issue is not the amount of faith they have, but a new understanding of what faith is. Once they understand that, the meaning of the metaphor will become clear.

The fact that Luke uses the terms “apostles” and “Lord” suggests that Jesus’ new and striking metaphor will be descriptive of their calling as apostles and what they will accomplish by faith—to uproot the mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. The mulberry tree is a deep-rooted deciduous fruit tree bearing black berries containing a sweet

reddish juice. It grows to a height of 20 to 30 feet. Jesus says, “If you had just this much faith, and you don’t, it would have obeyed you.”

So what then is the nature of faith that Jesus is talking about? Is it just believing that God will do impossible, outrageous things? Or is it an abstract religious feeling that everything will work out? No, it is much more specific, as Tom Wright contends, “It is believing that Israel’s God is acting climactically in the career of Jesus himself,... inaugurating his long-awaited kingdom.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God. Faith is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God that your faith is looking out on. If it’s the creator God, the God active in Jesus and the Spirit, then the tiniest little peep-hole of a window will give you access to power like you never dreamed of.<sup>6</sup>

So faith is first seeing what God is doing and then trusting his character enough to jump off the cliff and join in. The impossible doesn’t originate with us, but with God. The metaphor of the mulberry tree uprooted and transplanted in the sea is a powerful image of how communities thrive, not by insulating and isolating themselves from the evils of the world, like the Pharisees, but by venturing forth fearlessly into Satan’s darkest strongholds (symbolized by the chaotic sea) and planting the kingdom (God’s temple, the tree of life) right in the midst of it. And miraculously the people of God thrive in that evil environment. This is what every apostle did after they became eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ and received the power of the Holy Spirit.

Grace Kvamme and I had the privilege of attending International Justice Mission’s annual Global Prayer Gathering earlier this month. The conference was life-changing for me. On the one hand, it surfaced many of my shortcomings in my forty-year tenure of shepherding the flock, but also gave me new hope and vision in discipling our flock to “set at liberty those who are oppressed.” I have never met more quality people who inspire you to the core, yet are so humble in who they are.

Their methods are exactly what Jesus outlines in Luke 17. Their founder, Gary Haugen, has inculcated everyone in the organization with a radical faith, believing that the God of Israel has inaugurated his kingdom of justice on earth through Jesus. Therefore our job to be about the work God is already committed to. And the first step in that process is to talk to God about it in prayer, then go where he leads and boldly trust God to provide resources and people (nationals) to address injustice at every level—from the police, to the courts, to the lawmakers, to the undercover investigators, the social workers and safe houses to restore the victims, and the prosecutors to punish the perpetrators. Out of the multitude of criteria IJM uses to determine where to launch their next new work for justice, the one factor that rises to the top is their commitment to go where evil is done with impunity. This makes every rescue a miracle that is hard fought with excruciating persistence and patience, meticulous planning, and persevering prayer.

IJM is the perfect model of Jesus’ global vision of uprooting a mulberry tree and transplanting it in the darkest raging seas believing that it will not only survive, but that miraculously it will thrive. In 2010 IJM and their partners secured a 79% reduction in the availability of children for commercial sex in Cebu, Philippines. Over the last twenty years IJM has rescued more victims of injustice (18,000+) than all other organizations in the world combined.

What I concluded is that when God’s people choose to bring his light into the darkest places on earth, they experience the greatest joy of the presence of God that purifies the soul with an abiding faith and unquenchable love. As Isaiah promised, when God’s people “loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free...then your light will break forth like the dawn...then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (Isa 58:6, 8 TNIV). Being among the IJM team and worshipping together for three days, I felt like Jonathan, whose heart was strangely knit to David with holy love after he witnessed David slaying Goliath. Such is mine in appreciation for all that IJM is and does.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. The Supreme Privilege of Serving (Luke 17:7–10)

**“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? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; [lit. we are servants with no need; i.e. nothing is owed] we have only done what was our duty.’” (vv. 7–10)**

Jesus’ parable invites his listeners to imagine a scenario that was unthinkable in the Middle East. Kenneth Bailey explains:

The master-servant relationship...implies acceptance of authority and obedience to that authority. Yet the outsider needs to be sensitive to the security that this classical relationship provides for the servant and the sense of worth and meaning that is deeply felt on the part of a servant who serves a great man. These qualities of meaning, worth, security, and relationship are often tragically missing from the life of the modern industrial worker with his forty-hour week...The master is the master and is not the equal of his servant. Here the master does not eat with the servant.<sup>8</sup>

The servant comes in from his outdoor work, whether it be plowing or keeping sheep, in the late afternoon. He is then expected to wash, change clothes and serve his master his meal. Having fulfilled his duties the question that Jesus asks, “Does he *thank* the servant because he did what he was commanded?” Bailey explains this is better translated as “Does the servant have *special merit* because he did what was commanded?” The issue is not one of appreciation by the master, but whether the servant has placed his master in his debt by doing what was required. The answer is obviously “No.” Jesus’ concludes the parable “So you also, when you have done what was commanded say, ‘Nothing is owing us servants, we have only done our duty.’”

Bailey explains that “this phrase is unambiguous idiomatic speech among Palestinian and Lebanese village people.

House owner:	<i>fi hāja</i>	(Literally: ‘Is there any need?’ Meaning: ‘Do I owe you anything?’)
Workman:	<i>ma fi hāja</i>	(Literally: ‘There is no need.’ Meaning: ‘You owe me nothing.’) <sup>9</sup>

When we place the parable in the context of “forgiving your brother,” it revolutionizes our attitude. Tom Wright gives an intriguing spin on the relational dynamics of forgiveness. If I rebuke you and you repent and take full responsibility by owning your guilt, it is easy for me to take the high moral ground and forgive you. Your confession vindicates my innocence, and makes me superior to you.

Then, once I’ve enjoyed exercising that position once or twice, it’s time to draw back a bit. Why should I go on giving you all that freedom? Jesus’ approach is utterly different. When you forgive someone you are making yourself their servant, not their master...The point is that you’re not scoring moral points at all. You are to be humble, to take no advantage of the situation, to give to the other person the generous and welcoming forgiveness that God has shown you.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps there is even more. The parable calls to mind the story of Cain and Abel. “Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground” (Gen 4:2). When they came in from the field (lit. “at the end of days”) they served God a meal, which was an expression of their worship and love for God. Abel worshipped with his whole heart and out of appreciation gave God the first and the best of what he had. But sadly, Cain gave reluctantly and gave God what was equivalent to a tip.

What does this have to do with forgiving our brother? Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that when we are asked to forgive our brother, rather than being a burden, *it is our highest form of worship*. It is when we are privileged to represent the compassion of Jesus to others, to serve them a meal of his body and blood, to look them in the eye and say, “I forgive you and I love you and nothing will ever change that.” And in the end if my Lord asks me if he owes me anything, I will say, “No need my Lord. For it was my supreme privilege to serve you.”

So how do we keep our communities safe and flourishing?

1. By our constant care and compassion for the vulnerable.
2. By telling the truth in love and forgiving with limitless compassion.
3. By faith allowing God to uproot us from our comfortable environment and to plant us wherever he chooses, even within the gates of hell, knowing that even there, God’s kingdom will thrive.
4. By knowing that loving another person is to see the face of God and is, in fact, our most privileged expression of worship.

1. J. Guhrt, σκάνδαλον (*skandalon*) “offense,” NIDNTT 2:705.

2. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 340.

3. Carroll, *Luke*, 340–341.

4. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 442.

5. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 262–263.

6. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 204.

7. For more information on International Justice Mission see Gary Haugen’s book *Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2009) or visit their website [www.ijm.org](http://www.ijm.org).

8. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 119–120.

9. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 123.

10. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 203.