
Prayers

To God

Give your undivided attention to the Lord for a few moments today. Let Him search your soul, work by His Holy Spirit, and guide your heart into all truth and joy.

For myself

Weekly theme: Going the extra mile

How can you 'go the extra mile' in helping others today? It is a hard question to ask but one that can lead to considerable change and benefit both for us and for those with whom we live and work.

For others

May we have the courage to stand up for what is good, loving and right, Lord God. It is not always easy for us to determine the truth about any situation or circumstance, but inspire our searching hearts to perceive Your wisdom and Your guidance. In this way, may all God's people encourage each other to make a difference in this world, and may we pursue all that is good and true and wholesome for the sake of Your Kingdom.

AMEN

Meditation

Through the liberty of salvation in Christ our Lord,
We are set free to be the people we were made to be.

Through Him, our lives are covered by forgiveness;
So that nothing of our past can hurt us for ever.

Through Him, we are given the strength of angels;
To achieve what seems impossible in this world.

Through Him, we hear the Word of eternal truth;
Which yields joy, peace and divine deliverance.

Through Him, the heart discerns good from evil,
So right judgement can defend the soul from sin.

Through Him, we may be confident in the past and present,
And our future is secured on earth and in heaven.

Through Him, death holds no more terror or fear,
The Saviour has gone ahead of us, preparing the way.

Our testimony of faith stands for all eternity
We praise His Name forever, who is Christ our Lord.

Bible Passage

Luke 17:1-10

¹ Jesus said to his disciples,

“Things that draw people into sin will always happen, but how dreadful it will be for the one who brings them! ² It would be better for him if he was thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than he should cause a young child like this to fall into sin.

³ “Watch yourselves! If another disciple sins, you must warn him, and if he repents, you must forgive him. ⁴ Even if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you each time to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ you must forgive.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord,

“Increase our faith!”

⁶ The Lord replied,

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it should obey you.

⁷ “Think of what happens if you have a servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep; do you say, ‘Come in straight away to eat’? ⁸ Rather, do you not say to him, ‘Prepare my food, get yourself ready to serve me while I eat and drink, and you can eat and drink later’? ⁹ You do not have to thank the servant for doing what you told him! ¹⁰ So you then, when you have done everything required of you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants who have done our duty!’”

Review

What an extraordinary piece of Scripture! These words appear at first to be an almost random selection of sayings of Jesus, grouped roughly around the themes of leadership in the church, forgiveness and faith. This is partially right, but there is so much more for us here than a warning about false teachers (17:1f.) or an encouragement to have more faith (17:6). The passage ends with Jesus’ saying about the servant who comes in from the field, which sounds rather dour compared to Jesus’ other more enticing parables about banquets and feasting in the presence of the ‘master’ (see Luke 12:36f.). So what is the key that holds this section of Luke’s Gospel together?

In answer to this, the best way for us to understand this reading is to think of it all as advice to Christian leaders. Here, Luke is addressing the disciples, having just spoken out against the Pharisees for their incorrect presumptions about God and His Kingdom (16:12f.). The

picture Jesus paints of the Pharisees is that they wanted to have both worldly benefit and heavenly reward; they wanted to serve *'both God and wealth'* (12:13) but they could not! Now in chapter 17, Luke reports that Jesus then turned to the disciples to give them some uncompromising teaching about their responsibilities as church leaders of the future. This reading has traditionally been viewed as just this, and as we study it we will discover Jesus had much to say about the subject.

Jesus first gives a dire warning to the disciples; they must never be like the Pharisees who lead people away from God and into sin (17:1). The consequences of failing in this task are dire; using dramatic language Jesus says that it would be better to die than to be found leading God's people astray. I am not sure that when Jesus says *'young child'* here in verse 2 he is speaking of leading children astray. Jesus speaks in other Scriptures about children and the Kingdom of God (e.g. Matthew 18:2f.), but here, He is probably describing people who are young in faith as *'young children'*, whatever their age.

Jesus' direct command to leaders of the church is this, *'Watch yourselves!'* (17:3). This is of course good advice, but especially for leaders because in order to be effective, they must be acutely aware of the consequences of their own actions. It has long been known that good leaders need to be people who are *'self-aware'*, to use more modern language, but Jesus says the same. Those who speak and act as if they have no responsibility for the consequences of what they do are dangerous.

Against this background, Jesus adds here one of His supreme commands to love other people. We do not always associate *'forgiveness'* with love, but the two are inseparable, because just like the love of God, real love becomes meaningful when wrongs are forgiven. Moreover, love overcomes evil when sin is defeated in this way. This is why Jesus is so insistent on the need to forgive, and especially the need for leaders to forgive. Jesus tells a parable elsewhere about the Kingdom of God called the *'unforgiving servant'*, in which it becomes clear that just as the Father has loved and forgiven those who sin, so we must be willing to offer the same unconditional and endless forgiveness to others (see Matthew 18:23-35). So if this is the requirement for any disciple, how much more should leaders of God's people be willing to forgive sins? It is an important matter; the harbouring of upset, anger and all manner of ungodliness within the soul both can and will destroy one who leads God's people.

The disciples heard what Jesus was saying, and felt that His commands were unattainable. They said to Him, *'increase our faith'* (17:5)! Jesus' reply has become a famous saying, describing faith *'the size of a mustard seed'* as capable of doing great things. Strangely, this is repeated in Matthew's Gospel, which refers to faith moving *'mountains'* and not *'mulberry trees'* as here! In our world, moving mountains sounds more dramatic so we tend to quote this rather than Luke's version! But in so doing, we fail to connect with what Jesus means. The mulberry tree was famed for its age, and rabbis used it as a symbol of longevity, believing its roots remained in the ground for at least six hundred years! Jesus was saying that faith was not so much a matter of the performing of miracles as the route to a new work of God, supplanting the teaching of the Pharisees, and rooted in love and forgiveness.

So ultimately, Christian leadership is a leadership of service and love, and this is what Jesus reveals so forcefully in the last and perhaps most strange of sayings here. Yes, in heaven, we may expect our Lord to *'wait'* on us at His own banquet, in fulfilment of His promise:

'Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when He comes; truly I tell you, He will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and He will come and serve them.' (Luke 12:37)

Here in Luke, however, Jesus firmly tells the disciples that their leadership must focus on service, not reward. They must do what is expected of them and not dwell on the benefits of God's Kingdom as if they were a right to grasp. Like servants, they are not entitled to think

they can sit down with the Master at table, they must serve Him first before they see to their own needs, whatever the circumstances.

All this sounds like hard advice, but remember what it means. This teaching of Jesus strongly warns the leaders of God's people not to seek position or status while they serve the church on earth. We might think we could all agree on this, but look at the reality. The church is full of leaders, priests, speakers and others who promote themselves so well on TV, the internet and in publishing, you might think they consider themselves a cut above the ordinary, and far too important to contradict! Their books are promoted as if they contain wisdom akin to Scripture!

Be careful not to read this passage as merely general sayings and parables about faith and service. It has a specific place within Jesus' teaching concerning Christian leadership, and when read as such, it makes good sense. More than that, God's people today need to hold their leaders to this quality of spiritual integrity, characterised by love, forgiveness, and honest selfless service. The world wants much more bravado of its leaders, but God's people should be very cautious about such things.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V1 *'things that draw people into sin will always happen'*

Other translations:

'It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come' (NIV)

'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come' (NRSV)

The Greek sentence reads, *'it is inevitable that scandals should come'*. But the Greek word we interpret 'scandal' has a very particular meaning. It comes from a word referring to the pin that sets a trap, which when disturbed, allows the trap to spring. Out of this comes the idea of 'scandal', which is an event that triggers or reveals an evil that has hitherto been held back. Used here, it means something that triggers, or draws people into sin.

V4 *'I'm sorry'*

Other translations:

'I repent' (NIV, NRSV etc.)

Most Bible versions have 'I repent', but there is a good argument for translating this 'I'm sorry', because this is the way we express our regret and intent to change today. The concept of 'repentance' is of course important, but this is not the word people use now to express their turning away from evil and sin. 'Sorry' is a strange word in many respects, but it does express the intent to 'repent', and its use here may help some to accept the heart of Jesus' message in this passage.

V10 *'we are unworthy servants who have done our duty'*

Other translations:

“we are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty (NIV)

‘we are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done’ (NRSV)

There is only a small change in my version from what is commonly translated. I have missed out the word ‘only’ because it is not there in the Greek. You may say that this does not change the meaning much, but it makes the sentence read less like an excuse and more like a statement of fact, and this, I believe, helps our interpretation of this rather odd saying of Jesus.

Further Comments

The Millstone

To place a millstone around the neck of someone and throw them into the sea is about the most violent act imaginable; but Jesus uses this to describe the despicable crime of leading people astray on matters of faith and the Kingdom of God. On three occasions, Jesus uses the picture of a millstone placed around the neck of those who place ‘stumbling blocks’ that prevent people’s faith. The first comes in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus is clearly speaking about children:

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. (Mat 18:6-8 NRS).

The second comes in Mark’s Gospel, which is very close to Matthew’s Gospel as quoted above, and the third is our passage here today in which apart from the reference to ‘*young child*’, it appears that Jesus is speaking about those young in faith more than children per se.

As so often, we must be cautious about how we analyse this. There could have been many occasions when Jesus repeated certain teachings or used His stock of illustrations, so to try and find a common ‘original’ saying of Jesus from which these three can come is a somewhat false way of using Scripture. Although Luke refers to a millstone here there is no reason why Jesus could not have used this graphic illustration more than once; initially to speak of the peril of leading children astray (Matthew and Mark), and then as a development, of leading the young in faith astray (Luke).

The millstone was commonly a large cylindrical stone shaped to sit into another stone or hole in the ground, all carved to grind wheat flour when the millstone is turned. The technique is ancient and still used. Apart from being heavy, a millstone was a precious object and not one to be discarded lightly. Judges and Samuel describe the throwing of millstones from walled cities as an act of war (Judges 9:53, and 2 Samuel 11:21). In addition, Revelation describes a ‘*mighty angel*’ throwing down a millstone to bring an end to the violence of ‘*Babylon the great city*’, a representation of great evil (Rev. 18:21), and quaintly, refers only one verse later to the silencing of millstones and cessation of other crafts and trades at the end of time (Rev 18:22).

Forgiving seven times

When Jesus commands forgiveness 'seven times' (17:4), He does so in a manner consistent with the other times he speaks of forgiveness in Scripture (Matthew 18:21f.). The number seven is frequently used to indicate a number significantly larger than one, as we might expect, but perhaps more importantly, it indicates 'perfection' or 'complete'. So when Jesus casts out 'seven' demons from Mary Magdalene, he means both a large number and the full number necessary to make her clean (Luke 8:2f.), and the seven baskets full of leftovers from the feeding of the four thousand signifies a complete amount sufficient for the whole (Gentile) world. Remember, the twelve baskets from the five thousand indicates a sufficient amount for all God's chosen, New Covenant people.

Because of this, we can be in no doubt that when Jesus calls on people to forgive 'seven' times, He means sufficient times for forgiveness to be an effective expression of love. Of course this may take many more times than seven, as is made perhaps more clear in Matthew's version of this saying (Matt 18:21f.).

Discipleship

Application

Leadership as service

Personally, I find it very hard to come to terms with the idea of a 'priesthood' within the church that is different from the priesthood of all believers, or that confers any kind of spiritual status on people. I know that those set apart (ordained) for leadership and service in the church have a special role to fulfil, but it seems to me that the New Testament speaks strongly against all manner of grandiosity. Jesus' own example of meekness and strength in leadership seems to me very remote from the patterns of leadership both expected and exercised by many within the church.

There is no clear 'answer' to such problems, except what is found in passages of Scripture such as this. As a leader myself I must make sure that what I do and say measures up to what Jesus says and commands of those who lead His people. I must also pay attention to what the other authors of the New Testament, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, say, as well. One thing is very certain, however, which is that any leadership that does not show itself in sacrificial love and unstinting service is far from the calling of Christ.

Forgiveness

Some time ago I came to realise the connection between forgiveness and love, and I find the best way to express this is to say that forgiveness is 'practical love'. Surely, love fails precisely at the point where forgiveness is not forthcoming, and where forgiveness is shown, again and again, love conquers all. This, no less, is the meaning of the Cross, put into practice. It is also the meaning of salvation, by which God, in love, forgives our sins and makes us acceptable in His sight.

The only route to the Kingdom of God, Jesus teaches, is through love and forgiveness which is shown shown over and over again. That is, love of a friend (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19), love of other Christians (John 13:35), love of the enemy (Matt 5:43) and unstinting love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5). We will not find anything in Scripture to suggest that practical faith is anything less than faithful and repeatedly demonstrated love.

Ideas for what to do

- Ask yourself whether you are able to forgive as much as you should. Think back over recent times and reflect on any individuals you find difficult. Make sure you have a

forgiving attitude towards them, which is not the same as condoning any sin they may have committed, but which demonstrates to them the love of Christ by which all people are saved.

- Ask yourself whether you are willing to serve God's people, and serve them without spiritual reward. Talk about this if possible with a Christian leader, both to gain their perspective on this and clarify your own thoughts.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about Christian leadership? List the qualities you expect of a good Christian leader and see whether your list equates in any way with Jesus' teaching here.
2. What help do we need if we are to maintain Christ's standards of forgiveness and love?
3. In the light of this passage, how easy is it for the individual Christian leader to account for his or her own needs?

Final Prayer

Jesus our Lord and our Saviour, come amongst us in love to bless our leaders and give them all the succour and help they need. May all your people love and value their leaders and may all leaders love and value those over whom they have been given authority. Be our ultimate Leader and Guide, Lord Jesus, so that we may all find our way to Your Heavenly Kingdom. **AMEN**