



THE GOSPEL OF  
**Luke**

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 17:1-10**

To understand the need for rebuking, repentance, forgiveness, faith, and obedience.

## Small is Better than Nothing

One of the most misunderstood and misapplied phrases of Jesus is “faith like a grain of mustard seed.” It’s often used to communicate the idea that great things require very little actual faith as long as you *really believe* with zero doubt. Especially in charismatic circles this mustard-seed faith is all that is required, sometimes even to the exclusion of theology and doctrine. But is that what Jesus is really intending to communicate? In Luke 17:5-6, the disciples implore Jesus: “Increase our faith!” Jesus responds to them: “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.”

The point of this passage is not to emphasize faith over theology, or that a believer need only a fraction of the total faith they already possess, but to point out the utter lack of faith in the disciples at this point. They want Jesus to increase the faith they already have, and Jesus is telling them, “There is nothing to increase!” They were faith/less. The disciples are in many ways a picture of all believers. How often do we find ourselves thinking much more highly of ourselves and our spiritual condition than what is reality?

## Sin, Repentance, and Forgiveness

In the first four verses of Luke chapter 17, Jesus speaks to His disciples about the reality of sin and the way they are to handle not only their own sin, but the sin and repentance of those around them. Below is a breakdown of some of the key ideas in this passage.

**SURE TO COME**

The first thing of which Jesus reminds His disciples is the *sureness* of temptation that will come to them. Because of this certainty, Jesus commands them in verse 3: “Pay attention to yourselves!” It’s in the imperative voice which conveys a commandment akin to: “Be on guard! Be on the lookout! Watch out for yourselves!” The idea here is that because of the certainty of sinful temptation, one needs to be self-aware of this and on the lookout constantly. As soon as a believer lets his or her guard down, they are all but guaranteed to fall into the sin that seeks to destroy them.

**WOE!**

The most interesting point of emphasis in Jesus’ dialogue in verses 1 through 10 is not the fact that all of His disciples will be tempted to sin, but the significant judgment that will come upon those who *tempt others* to sin. Jesus says in the latter part of verse 1: “But woe to the one through whom they (temptations to sin) come!” In other words, it’s bad enough that you yourself will be tempted; don’t tempt others to do the same. Those who do tempt others will face consequences: “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.” This is similar to what Paul says in Romans 1:32, concerning people who “know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

The judgment imagery is that of millstone, a heavy object, used to weigh a person down who has been thrown into the ocean or sea, causing them to drown. A millstone in the ancient context was used for grinding grain and could vary in all sorts of sizes. Some scholars indicate that Jesus had the larger millstones in mind, ones that would need to be moved by an animal because of their weight.<sup>1</sup> Also important to note is the phrase “little ones.” While Jesus does speak to the importance of having “childlike faith” (Matt. 18:2-4), “little ones” in this context likely meant people like Lazarus (16:20-21), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the tax collectors and sinners (15:1), and the other lower-class outcast people to whom Jesus had been ministering.

**REBUKE, REPENTANCE, FORGIVENESS**

Jesus says in verse 3: “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.” There is a practical outline here for how believers should handle sin in their communities. If someone sins against you, they are to be *rebuked*. A rebuke, in Greek is the term ἐπιτιμάω (epitimaō), and it means something like, “to set a value upon, or to assess a penalty.” It carries with it the concept of evaluating the extent of the sin and holding them to an account. This makes sense, given the fluctuating nature of sin and the various damages it can cause. If someone sins in a manner that is minor and only affects one person, they should be rebuked appropriately. However, if the sin is more public in nature and damages several relationships, a more public and swift rebuke should be given. However, the goal of the rebuke is not the rebuke itself, but the hope is that it will lead a person to repent. The word for “repent” in this passage is μετανοέω (metanoēō), and it means “to undergo a change in frame of mind or feeling.” To repent means to agree with God concerning one’s sin. The purpose of rebuking sin is to lead a person to agreement with God that would they have done is sinful, and thus ask for forgiveness. Jesus says we are to forgive as many times as they ask. He uses the number seven in the illustration, which is no doubt purposeful; it’s a perfect number within a Jewish context. One additional

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 429. Stein writes: “A millstone was used for grinding grain. It could vary in size from a small stone used by an individual to grind grain to a large round stone turned by an animal. The latter may have been meant here (cf. Matt 18:6; Mark 9:42).”

note is important, and that is the necessity of humility in rebuking a brother or sister in Christ. Anytime a Christian confronts and rebukes sin, it should be done with the reality of their own sinfulness in mind as an effort to eschew humility in the rebuking process.

## No Pats On the Back

In verses 7 through 10, Jesus gives an illustration concerning a servant and master relationship. He asks whether the master of a servant will not demand that the servant act like a servant and do the work of a servant, and then asks in verse 9: “Does he (the master) thank the servant because he did what was commanded?” Of course, the implied answer is decidedly, “no.” The master will not thank the servant, not because he isn’t kind, but because the servant is merely doing his job. In the same way, disciples of the LORD ought not to expect a pat on the back for doing what we are commanded: “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’” (Lk. 17:10). The point that Jesus is making here is that as Christians are unworthy servants in the sense that even when we have fully obeyed God (which we never do perfectly anyways), we still have only done what was asked of us by our Master. Obedience is not something to be commended but expected. It’s the minimal standard, not the above and beyond. Christians who obey are simply doing what they were always supposed to do to begin with. This is an important distinction. Christ followers should never be overly proud of their obedience, but recognize that it was the minimal standard they have met, and nothing more.

## What About Now?

There are a few takeaways in this passage. For one, we ought to understand that our faith is more often vacant than it is anything else. Mustard seed faith is not something simple to aspire to, but nearly impossible. Two, whenever someone sins, we ought to rebuke them in love for the purpose of bringing them to repentance. Whenever they genuinely repent and ask for forgiveness, we ought to forgive as God has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). Three, obedience is lowest expectation we can have for ourselves. We should never be overly proud for meeting the minimal standards. We have nothing to boast in ourselves; only Christ (2 Cor. 10:17).

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Luke 17:1. To whom is Jesus speaking? What does He say to them?

---



---

2. Read Luke 17:2. In your own words, summarize this verse. Who are the “little ones” in this context? (Hint: See above note)

---



---

### Day Two

1. Read Luke 17:3-4. What is the commandment in verse 3? Why should followers of Jesus “pay attention” to themselves? What are we to do when another brother or sister sins? How do we respond if they repent and ask for forgiveness?

---



---

2. Read Luke 17:5-6. What question is asked of Jesus? Who asks this question? How does Jesus respond? What is the point Jesus is making here? (Hint: See above notes)
- 
- 

### Day Three

1. Read Luke 17:7. What example does Jesus use in asking this question?
- 
- 

2. Read Luke 17:8. Instead, what will the master to say to his servant?
- 
- 

### Day Four

1. Read Luke 17:9. Why would the master not thank the servant for the servant's compliance?
- 
- 

2. Read Luke 17:10. In your own words, summarize verse 10. How does this apply to us today?
- 
- 

## Week 61 Discussion: Forgiveness

In Luke 17:1-4, Jesus tells His followers to “pay attention” to themselves lest they allow sin to overpower them. He gives directions to rebuke one another in the event a Christian brother or sister sins, and then spells out the importance of forgiveness when a person repents. Talk as a group about the various aspects of forgiveness.

1. Icebreaker: What's the biggest thing for which another human being has forgiven you?
2. Is forgiving other people hard for you? Why or why not?
3. Is it more difficult for you to forgive or ask for forgiveness? Why?
4. How often does God forgive you? How often then should you forgive others?
5. How does being forgiven make you feel?
6. How does forgiving others make you feel?

## Takeaways:

1. Jesus says we should be on guard against sin, repent when necessary, and forgive others when they repent as well.
2. Jesus teaches that obedience to God's commandments does not deserve applause; it's the bare minimum.