

Luke 17/1-10: SIN, FAITH, DUTY

1. Responsibility for sin (v1-3a)

v1a

Because of the fallen nature of man and of the world we live in, things that cause people to sin are bound to come: we cannot prevent ourselves or others from being exposed to temptation.

Note, however, Jesus doesn't say *sin* is bound to come but 'things that cause people to sin'.

v1b

But he pronounces a strong judgement on those through whom they come. It is one of the few times he uses the word "woe" (certain judgement, hopeless misery) except in condemning the Pharisees.

Many sins, while they are chosen by the sinner, come through the mediation/influence of one or more persons.

v2

Jesus says it would be better for them to be die rather than to live and be part responsible for causing someone to sin: the former would mean physical death only, the latter spiritual judgement and death (cf. 12/4-5, 13/1-5).

v3a

A sober and timely warning. We may think we would never cause someone to sin, yet seemingly 'small' attitudes, words and actions towards others (e.g. if we are proud, angry, unmerciful) can provoke them to sin.

Comment

When we sin, who is responsible? The witness of the whole Bible (and of our conscience – and indeed of common sense) is that we are. Ultimately, we cannot blame anyone else (person, society, God or devil) as modern man is so apt to try to do. We choose it, we do it. Until we accept responsibility for our sin, we will never find a solution or cure for it.

Yet the Bible recognizes that someone else may also be responsible to some measure for some of our sin – but without ever removing our responsibility. (We are responsible in *all* our sin; another may be co-responsible in *some* of our sin.) For example: those who make and market pornography; those who indirectly cause a lifestyle of promiscuity or homosexuality by sexually abusing the young; those who influence others into substance abuse, which may lead to addiction; those who recruit others into a lifestyle of violence or crime.

Children are especially vulnerable to having personality and lifestyle (conscience, values, etc) twisted through things done to them. Hence Jesus particularly condemns those causing 'these little ones to sin' (cf. Mt 18/6f). But his judgement is against causing anyone of any age to sin, and all men in their vulnerability are 'little ones'.

2. Response to sin (v3b-4)

So we are to guard against ever causing someone to sin. But what should be our response if someone does sin?

v3b

First, if a brother sins, we are to rebuke him – not as if we were ourselves faultless (i.e. hypocritically), or in a way which condemns him (Lk 6/37,41f), but humbly (mindful of our own weakness) and in concern for his spiritual welfare (cf. Ga 6/1-5). Note, it must be a "brother": we have no business to do this with those outside the church (cf. 1 Co 5/9-13a).

Second, if he then repents, we are to forgive him. Clearly, repentance must precede forgiveness. But surely only God forgives sins? Yes, but we are not talking about making our own decision whether to forgive or not but 'merely' pronouncing the forgiveness God has revealed himself as giving to the repentant sinner. As ready as we need to be to rebuke a brother if he sins (to remind him of God's displeasure with it), as ready and more we must be to forgive that brother if he repents (to declare and assure him of God's forgiveness: cf. Jn 20/23).

v4

Here Jesus slightly alters the focus, from "If your brother sins" (against God, and perhaps others) to "If he sins *against you*". The fallen heart finds it hard to forgive injury, let alone forgive the same person repeatedly for the same injury. But carrying through the instruction from v3b, we are to forgive the person as readily if he has sinned against us as if he had 'only' sinned against God/another – except that here we are not only pronouncing God's forgiveness of the sinner for the injury done to *him* but adding our sincere forgiveness of the sinner for the injury done to *us*. Moreover, Jesus is telling us that even if someone sins against us many times, we are to forgive them as many times. The "seven times" is not given so we can count to seven and then give expression to our bitterness and condemn rather than forgive: it is a standard biblical way of saying 'many times, repeatedly, as often as he does'. If it's truly in your heart to forgive, it will be there all the time(s).

But a difficult question arises here. We understand that when someone sins (against God), God only forgives (and we can only pronounce his forgiveness) "if" and when that person repents (v3b). But when someone sins

against us, doesn't Jesus teach us that we have to forgive them regardless of whether they repent or not (Lk 11/4b, 6/27-36, 23/34, Mw 18/21-35) – yet this text says *if* they come back to us and repent we forgive? Yes, we are to forgive them in and from our heart when they sin against us (this is what God wants, it is to be like him, and it keeps us free), regardless of whether they repent or not, but we are to speak and assure them of that forgiveness should they come to us in repentance. (Note: in Mw 18/21-35 the same exhortation is made to forgive repeatedly those that repeatedly sin against you without the requirement that the offender first repents.)

3. Exercising faith (v5-6)

The apostles' half incredulous exclamation, half desperate request is spoken in the context of needing to forgive repeatedly the one who repeatedly sins against you: to be able to do this, even to believe that I *can* do this, requires great faith!

Jesus' response is that they only needed to have "faith as small as a mustard seed" (the smallest of seeds: Mw 13/32) in order to exercise faith and see great results. (He made a similar exhortation after the disciples had failed to deliver the demonized boy after the transfiguration: Mw 17/20.) In this super-short (mustard seed!) teaching on faith, Jesus seems to be emphasizing the fact that you don't grow your faith (whether by straining, imagining, striving or praying) *in order* to exercise it but you grow your faith *by* exercising it: exercise the faith you have, however small, by believing God for something, and it will grow as you do.

4. Doing our duty (v7-10)

Jesus ends by telling a short parable about a master and servant. The servant wouldn't expect to cease serving, still less that his master would serve him, just because he had fulfilled one task. No, he would expect to continue serving, waiting on his master and finishing all his tasks. Even then, he would expect no special recognition or reward for doing so – for he is just a servant doing his duty.

The idea of having a duty towards anything or anyone has fallen on hard times in our self-centred age. Even the Christian life is often presented today so one-sidedly as a matter of God doing everything for you that you ever dreamed of that the idea that we may have a duty towards God (let alone man) seems strange to many Christians. But in this short parable, Jesus plainly tells us that one strand of the biblical understanding of living out our salvation in holiness and service is that of fulfilling our duty towards God.

For all the many passages in Scripture that speak of how much God does for and gives to us, and of the privileges and rest we have as sons, Scripture speaks also of Jesus as Lord and master, and us as God's/Christ's servants; and although by his grace and goodness he does reward our life and service, we would do (and should be just as ready to do) everything we do even if there was no reward – out of love and gratitude, but also because we are servants as well as sons, who owe everything to the one infinitely greater and more worthy than us. And even when we have given everything we can to fulfil his will and obey his call ("when you have done everything you were told to do"), we expect no special reward or reversal of roles because "We are unworthy servants: we have only done our duty" – i.e. our service puts no claim or obligation on God.

Serving and servanthood come out of a right perspective of who God is and who we are in comparison: he the Lord, the master and owner (twice over – by creation and redemption) of all life and lives; we those who are utterly dependent on him for life and salvation (for all things natural and spiritual)(Ac 17/24-28).

The Bible many dozens of times refers to believers (or a believer) as the servant(s) of God/Christ (and also of the gospel, the church and each other). The NT does not set our being sons over against our being servants as we do. (It does not create a tension or a comparison between them; it simply states and celebrates both.) Jesus Christ, *the* Son of God, is *also* the supreme Servant of God (without this being in any way a lesser role). We who have the privilege and glory of being sons also have the privilege and glory of being servants – of being created, redeemed and called to serve his purposes on the earth!

Many Christians would have a more biblical and balanced view of the Christian life, and of their status and role relative to God's, if they could add this truth to the other strands of teaching. They would be more purposeful and fulfilled, more happy and content, less susceptible to a demand or entitlement attitude, and less likely to be disappointed or disillusioned in living out their faith.

P.S. The fact that God does sometimes reverse the roles is thus truly astonishing! (Jn 13/4-5, Lk 12/37)