

Characteristics of Discipleship Luke 17:1-10

We come to the last portion of Jesus' teachings in Perea. They seem to still be part of a longer sermon or teaching that Jesus gave that covers Luke 15 and 16 and now into chapter 17. As I studied and meditated on these teachings, I could see some connections between them and what was spoken earlier, but not necessarily one main point or continuous train of thought.

There is a common trait that they all have to do with characteristics or attitudes of disciples, so that's how I want to work through the text this morning. We are going to look at four characteristics of discipleship that are all important in our lives and should give us plenty to think about and evaluate where we're at and if we need to grow in them. The first is in verses 1-2.

Read Luke 17:1-2.

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.

This is a striking illustration and a grave warning. I think he gives it in light of the Pharisees in the crowd who were full of hypocrisy and leading many astray. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13-15: *"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."* They were causing the "little ones" to stumble and sin.

Jesus could have children in mind, or anyone who is vulnerable or impressionable. Woe to those who cause them to wander into sin. Jesus says temptations are inevitable. According to the commentary by Leon Morris, the word here is that of the bait-stick or trigger of a trap. It's also translated stumbling block. These kinds of things will certainly happen in our lives. They are inevitable. But woe to him through whom they come. That means calamity and destruction be upon him. The

picture Jesus gives is very startling. As horrible as it would be to be dragged to the bottom of the sea with a heavy millstone tied around your neck, it will be worse for those who cause the vulnerable to stumble into sin.

A heavy warning for anyone who was listening. For the disciples, this warning can be given in a positive way – keep watch on your life and doctrine and the influence you have on others. Are you leading people toward Christ and righteousness or away? If people – maybe even your own kids – would imitate your life, are you modeling Christ to them, or leading them away? Sometimes we think it's funny to get others to do crude or offensive things as long as they're not too bad, but it isn't! I don't think Jesus would laugh. He publicly rebuked the Pharisees and pronounced their destruction.

Jesus continues...

Read Luke 17:3-4.

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

Keep watch over yourselves – this could apply to the previous verses or the ones we just read. Keep watch over yourselves so that you don't cause someone to stumble and keep watch over yourselves so that you can rescue one another if you are wandering into sin. We see a contrast in behavior between these first two sections. Rather than causing someone to stumble, be the one to help them stay on track.

If you see that a Christian brother or sister has wandered into sin or has sinned against you, it's important that you rebuke them. Now the word for rebuke does not give the idea of a harsh confrontation or chewing someone out for bad behavior. It's a warning from a friend. If you heard a friend talking about making a bad decision related to a house project or a financial decision or something in their job, you would most likely say something to try to help them avoid problems, and this is the same. Warn them from continuing down the path they are headed.

Now what if that person has sinned against you in some way? What if they've done something to offend or cause problems in your life? Here Jesus emphasizes the importance of forgiveness. If a person has sinned against you and comes to you in repentance, you need to forgive them. And if they do it again, you need to forgive them again. Whenever someone comes to you admitting their sin and wanting to change, you need to forgive them. According to the ESV Study Bible, in the Jewish culture it was taught to forgive a brother three times in a day, which was putting a high standard on forgiveness, but here Jesus is telling them to go even beyond that.

I think he is stressing the importance of being merciful. We who have been shown such mercy and forgiveness by God for our sins need to be over-abundant in showing mercy and forgiveness to those who sin against us. I'm reminded of the parable of the unmerciful servant...

Matthew 18:23-35: "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

I realized this week that this is an area I need to grow. I'm too quick to write people off for repeated offenses. And it's often not even offenses that are against

me, it's often a cyclical behavior of some kind that gets them in trouble and to a point of brokenness and repentance, but then they fall back into it again and again. I find myself becoming calloused and responding to their repentance with cynicism. I'm really thankful God doesn't do that with me! And I need to become more like him. As our heavenly Father has forgiven us, so we also must forgive.

Now, does that mean I should automatically trust that someone will never do it again and act as if nothing had happened? No, forgiveness doesn't equal restoration of trust, but forgiveness means I'm letting go of any grudges or bitterness and I'm not going to demand something more from them in order to make things right for the wrong they've done.

Jesus continues with the third characteristic of discipleship in verses 5 and 6.

Read Luke 17:5-6.

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

I think Jesus' disciples responded to the heaviness and difficulty of what he was saying. I'm sure they thought the Jewish principle of forgiving someone three times was hard enough, but now Jesus demands even more.

"Increase our faith!" In other words, there's no way we can do what you're asking of us! Perhaps they thought they had to become super disciples with unshakable faith to do what Christ was calling them to do. And I think Jesus wanted to contradict that notion. You don't need to have a whole bunch of faith or to be some kind of super disciple. Even if you have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed you can uproot a mulberry tree, which was known to be impossible to uproot.

It's not the size of your faith that makes the difference it's the strength of your God. God can enable any believer to do what he has called them to do if they will take their reliance off themselves and place it upon him. Simply trust the Lord and walk in obedience to him and see what he will do. You think it's impossible to keep forgiving that person? Good. It is for you, but for God, all things are possible. Trust him and he will give you the strength to forgive. Faith isn't a shot of steroids

or a super energy drink that gets us to a point where we believe we can. It's admitting "I can't" and relying on the one who can.

So far we've seen the importance of leading people toward Christ and not away from him, the importance of helping one another avoid the pitfalls of sin, the importance of showing abundant mercy and forgiveness, of relying on our heavenly Father to empower us to do what he's called us to do, and now we get to the last few verses which are basically another parable.

Read 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'? ⁸ 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'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ 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.'"

Part of me doesn't like this teaching because it seems to contradict what Jesus taught just a little earlier in the parable of the lost son. In that parable the father had no interest in his son being a servant, because he wanted a son! But here it seems like God is being portrayed as a harsh master who doesn't care about his servants, and we should just hang our heads and fulfill our duty.

But I don't think Jesus gave this parable to show his disciples about what God is like, I think he gave it to teach them about the importance of the attitude we have toward God – always having a humble and grateful heart to serve the Lord. We shouldn't get to the point where we feel like we've put in enough time and work in ministry and now God should give us a reward. That shows us we have a wrong perspective of why we do ministry. Ministry is an overflow of gratitude toward God. If we are aware of all the blessings and privileges and grace and mercy that God has poured out on us, it will be our delight to humbly walk in obedience to him and serve him with all of our lives. He doesn't owe us anything, though he continues to give us so much. Yet we owe him everything.

Yes, we are received as sons and daughters by our heavenly Father and we should live like sons and daughters, but that doesn't mean we should have an

entitlement mentality or think that somehow God owes us for the ministry we've done. We should be filled with humility and gratitude for all that our loving heavenly Father has done for us.

As we've gone through these four characteristics of disciples, perhaps one of them has revealed an area that you need to seek repentance and growth:

- What kind of influence are you having on the people around you? How do you influence those who are just beginning to look to Christ?
- Or what about when a brother or sister is going down the wrong path? Do you care enough to talk with them and help them turn around?
- How do you respond when a fellow believer offends you or does something to frustrate you? Do you harden your heart in bitterness and cynicism, or are you quick to forgive and show mercy in the same way God has done for you?
- Have you given up on doing the difficult things that Christ has called us to do because you realize you don't have the willpower to do them? Or have you surrendered to the Lord, admitted you can't, and begun to rely on him instead?
- And finally, what kind of attitude do you have when it comes to ministry and growing as a disciple in Christ? Do you feel like you've put in enough time and deserve to kick back and take a break? Or do you realize with deep gratitude all that God has done for you and serve with thankfulness and humility?

Chances are there's one or more of these things that God has touched you with this morning and as we move into a time of communion it will be a perfect opportunity for you to confess and pray.