

My Brother's Keeper, Part 5

Luke 17:3-4

Well, we're in Luke 17, and we're continuing a series called My Brother's Keeper, and we are looking at Luke 17:1-10. We see that this falls immediately on the heels of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and Jesus said to his disciples, Luke 17:1-2, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come." What's the woe? The woe has just been described in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

It was a graphic, vivid portrayal of the woe he's describing. "Woe to the one through whom temptations to sin come." Verse 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." And then this in verse 3, "Pay attention to yourselves."

After delivering a parable, graphically, vividly, terrifyingly portraying the reality of a rich man who unexpectedly finds himself suffering in torment. It's a religious man. In this culture, he would have been a religious man. He would have been a church-going man. He would have been your neighbor. He would have been friendly, respected, commended in the community and yet he finds himself unexpectedly suffering in torment after he dies.

And so Jesus, his warning here to us as a church, to his disciples, this warning makes perfect sense. "Pay attention to yourselves." Watch out for yourselves. It's not an individualistic command, just pay attention to yourself individually, though this has individual implications.

This is a corporate command. Pay attention to yourself as a community. Pay attention to yourself as a fellowship of believers. You disciples, pay attention to yourselves. You are your brother's keeper. We have to watch out for ourselves. We have to guard the fellowship. It's our duty, our job, to protect the little ones in our midst.

Now the evil person, the unrepentant sinner, has entered the church, and he starts off-loading stumbling blocks, and he set them before one of Jesus' little ones. And once somebody noticed this going on, rebuked the sin. The church's immune system did its job. It perfected the body from this infection. The false brother has been identified and exposed. The cause of stumbling eventually has been removed from the church.

Man, think about the good that's been done when the church obeys the Lord's prescription, here. The unrepentant sinner has been loved so well through this loving rebuke. The little ones have been kept safe through the removal of the cause of stumbling. The church has been kept pure through the process of discipline, strengthened to fear the Lord by dealing decisively with sin. The Lord has been honored, feared, obeyed, worshipped in obedience to Luke 17:3 and corresponding instruction there in Matthew 18. This church pleased its Lord and its Savior by loving God, being obedient, and loving men in doing what's right.

Listen, beloved, that's what happens every time we practice church discipline together in a formal way, when we have to announce a name before you at a communion service. We're simply following our Lord's instructions. And on one level, this is nothing remarkable at all. This is just normal Christianity. We're doing our duty. We're doing exactly what the Lord has prescribed.

On another level, though, this is quite remarkable because through our simple obedience on our part, Christ is accomplishing amazing things. He's doing a deep spiritual work. He's keeping the body pure, keeping the body holy. He's protecting the little ones. He's protecting the fellowship. He's exposing the man's sin, graciously bringing sin to mind, the judgment of a church against him so that he can examine himself, recognize he's not in the faith. Through all this, Christ is strengthening and protecting his flock. Remarkable, remarkable, amazing things going on that we're not privy to because it's something God sees and we don't.

Now verse 3 was about confronting a sinning brother, and in verse 4 we said this gets personal. "If he sins," what, "against

you.” Okay, now this is personal. Now this stings. You've been victimized by the sin. Not only that, but seven times in a day. And he, he's not getting the point. What now? Well, we started by making a reasonable assumption that this person's a brother or sister, and when we witnessed a verifiable violation of the truth, we engaged in biblical confrontation.

Now, when we have to do this repeatedly, and even if the sin is against us personally, we offer them a charitable absolution. A charitable absolution, that's just another way of saying, in love we forgive them. In verse 4, Jesus paints a more difficult picture for us. The offense is not against someone else now. It's not generalized now. It's particularized, it's personal, and it's repeated. And yet Jesus is emphatic about our forgiving one another even when, and especially when, we're offended personally or we're offended repeatedly.

The way Jesus says this in the original, seven times of offense is what gets the emphasis. Literally, he says, “If seven times in the day he should sin against you.” The emphasis there is on the repetition and then on the personal nature. So no

matter how hurtful, no matter how often, no matter how tedious this is getting, our duty is to forgive the repenting brother.

How could we do this? Are we up to this task? I mean, think of some of the personal, inter-relational conflicts you have just in your home. Husband and wife, parents and kids, kids and kids. Think about how easy it is to set us off, how just one comment can be like, Man, who does she think she is? Man, did he wake up on the wrong side of the bed! You know, it's just like, starts just with a little thing.

Jesus says seven times in a day. When we think about the parable of the unforgiving servant, end of Matthew 18, we realize how much we have been forgiven. Our sins against a holy God have been wiped away, all of our sins punished in Christ. If we'll keep mindful of that, man, we're ready and eager to offer forgiveness to anybody who offends us. What a minor thing to offend me. What am I? Who am I?

Jesus is emphatic about our need to forgive, particularly in the form of the verb. He uses the word, forgive, *aphiemi*. In

verse 3, he uses the imperative tense when he first commands for forgiveness. It's an imperative. It's a command: Forgive. And then in verse 4, he uses the future tense of the same verb. He makes that command emphatic. So Jesus goes from forgive to, you will forgive.

Kids understand this instinctively. Mom can say, Clean your room, but when she says, You will clean your room, oh, man, kids are like, Okay, she means it. Get to work. Mom's not playing around. When she invokes the authority of the father, Wait 'til your father gets home, now you've really gone over the edge. It's too late. Better get that room clean.

Our Lord wants us to think this way about forgiveness. This attitude of forgiveness, this tenderness, this graciousness, it needs to pervade our believing community. Our entire church needs to be of this mindset, that there is a tone among the members of the local church, of forgiveness and graciousness and tenderness toward one another. Forgiving attitude like this, keeping no record of wrongs, not quick to be offended, eager to forgive, this should characterize our fellowship, shouldn't it?

Listen, when a readiness to forgive sets the tone, it encourages the practice of biblical confrontation in the church. Can you see that? The more gracious we are with each other, the more ready we are to give correction, the more open we are to receive correction, man, this just opens, this just facilitates the health of the body and a healthy immune system keeping us healthy, well, protected.

We need to know, don't we, that we can fail with one another, that's not going to ruin the friendship, that we'll keep the relationship. We need to sense with each other, don't we, this sincere longing for holiness, for reconciliation, for restoration. That's what Jesus is trying to promote here among his disciples, when he commands, when he insists upon, and he is even somewhat stern in saying to his disciples, forgive, and, by the way, You will forgive. It's not an option. He is emphatic.

Lest we misconstrue this, though, lest we distort what Jesus is actually saying, we need to see that there are conditions, aren't there, here, for the transaction of



forgiveness to take place. Notice how long with the seven-time repetition of sin, "seven times," by the way, is a figure of speech. You're not to be counting like Peter, you know, seventy times seven. It's just a figure of speech. It notes this indefinite number of offenses that just seems to keep on going.

Seven times of sinning corresponds, there in verse 4, to a seven-time acknowledgement of sin on the part of the sinner, a seven-time confession of sin, and a seven-time commitment to repentance in verse 4. After sinning against you seven times, times he returns to you, and seven times saying, that is confessing his sins, and seven times affirming, I repent. So in that case, as he comes to you confessing his sin, acknowledging and saying, I'm repenting, look, your heart has to be soft. You have to forgive him. And why wouldn't you?

Jesus emphasizes repentance in this exchange. He uses two different verbs for repentance. In verse 4, it says in verse 4, "He turns to you." That's the verb *epistrepho*, literally returns to the physical motion of turning around. So imagine somebody standing in one direction. They turn 180 degrees and go in the other direction. *Epistrepho*. It's returning. So here *epistrepho*,

figuratively used to picture repentance. He's returning to you in his heart. It's a turning. It's a changing of mind, it's a reversing course of action. And that is true repentance.

The second verb for repentance in verse 4, Jesus puts it into the mouth of the repentant sinner. "He returns to you seven times, saying," and there it is, *metanoeo*, I repent, I repent. The verb *metanoeo*, it has the, the word *nous* in it, mind, at its root. So literally *metanoeo* is a change of mind, and results in a change of direction, a change in attitude, a change in speech, a change in behavior, change in lifestyle.

So here's what this looks like. Struggling brother. He sinned, sinned against you. What do you do when he sins? You rebuke him. If he repents, great. You've won your brother. You forgive him. Forgive him. You let it go. But here, this struggling brother, he's struggling, and he sins against you again. He's got this habit of sinning. He's got decades in the world of practicing this way, and so he sins against you again and again and again.

You've already rebuked him, so you don't need to go and badger him over it. But he returns to you on his own. He returns to you again and again, and he comes in humility. He comes confessing his sin. He comes saying to you, Listen, I repent. And Jesus uses the present tense verb there, so it can be accurately translated, I am repenting, which gives this idea of a continuousness, this habitual commitment to repentance.

This is talking about his commitment to the ongoing work of repentance in his life. He's affirming his commitment to repent. When this happens, and it's happened to me, I've gone to others and I've seen their attitude toward me, this provokes feelings of compassion with each other, doesn't it? We need to see how much of a hold that this sin has on this brother or this sister.

It's like what the Puritans used to call a besetting sin. It's one that's kind of deeply entrenched. It's going to take some time. How do we know it's going to take some time? Because he keeps doing it. He keeps, seven times a day, and he keeps having to come to you and saying, Man, I blew it again. But he keeps also in humility coming back, acknowledging his fault, and admitting to you, I'm repenting.

So we're not talking about here someone who shirks his responsibility, someone who ignores or minimizes the seriousness of his sin. This isn't someone who is indifferent to the offense of his sin against God. He's not calloused about the effect of his sin against you or against others.

This is a true brother, this is a true sister, a friend in Christ who's simply struggling with sin. He's in the fight, he's just been knocked down. You just need to help him up, patch up the wounds, stop the bleeding, set the legs, set the limb, put the gun back in his hand and let him get back in the fight, to get back online with you. It's a brother. It's a sister. He wants freedom from his sin. Just finds it hard to overcome, finds it hard to find full victory and repentance.

And our hearts go out to a person like that, don't they? Invokes our sympathy. How many of us have struggled in the same way with a sin, found some particular sin really difficult to overcome? Isn't this the kind of treatment we want when we continue to blow with somebody else? Don't we want somebody to

just have a sympathetic ear to understand and say, Look, I get it. Summons our compassion with one another.

It stirs us to action so we can help this friend. We don't want him to become discouraged. We don't want him to become weary in well-doing because if he continues to pursue obedience to Christ, the Spirit is going to help him to the end, to the finish line, and he will overcome.

Maybe this brother or sister, by coming over and over, maybe they're showing that they need our help. Maybe they don't understand how to work out repentance. That's a fair thing. Then take them into Scripture. Help them to understand the nature of sin, help them to understand what repentance looks like, how to renew the mind so that it works out from the inside out to hate and put off the sin and to love and pursue the righteousness.

Maybe they need our help with that. Maybe they need our help to workout a strategy, clarify some tactics in putting off sin, and mind renewal, and putting on righteousness. Perhaps we should call for someone who's older, wiser, more mature in the

faith and get their counsel to help this brother or sister in repentance. Whatever the case, Jesus is calling for this pervasive, foundational, forgiving attitude.

If you're thinking to yourself, man, this sounds hard. I'm not even close to being the kind of person who's mature enough to practice biblical confrontation. That's somebody else's gift in the body. I've got the gift of, just, encouragement. I just say nice and positive things to everybody. Wrong. Jesus brings you into it. You're all practicing biblical confrontation, and if you're not, you're wrong. You are your brother's keeper.

But let me encourage you with just a few closing thoughts here to make this your habit to practice this. First of all, notice in verse 5 that Jesus' Apostles, the Twelve, they felt exactly the same way as you're feeling right now. They heard Jesus' instructions, here, and look at verse 5. The Apostles said to the Lord, whoa, time out, increase our faith, turn up the, turn up the nozzle and pour a bunch of faith into us. Because man, this is beyond us. Our faith is too small to handle this.

This “brother’s keepers,” keeper mentality does require us to take a very tough stand against sin, to confront and purge any cause for stumbling out of our fellowship. But while we take a tough stand against sin, at the same time when we confront sin, we also have to have this uber meek, gentle demeanor. How do you get ahold of the two things together in the same life? We stand tough, but we do it with the tender heart. We're strong and straightforward and direct, and yet at the same time, gentle, gracious, eager, ready to forgive.

The Apostles here are correct in saying, Whoa, time out. Me? Increase our faith. Jesus is giving us the broadest responsibility to be watchful in the fellowship, and at the same time, we have to have this magnanimous heart of tenderness toward people that we frankly don't have all the time, even toward the most offensive, immature, repeated offender who keeps on hurting us with their sin.

It's hard stuff. The duty is way beyond our natural ability, isn't it? That's why they say this, Increase our faith.

So if you have that sense, listen, you're in good company. It's exactly what the Apostles felt. It's exactly what they sensed. And we'll come back to that challenge when we tackle verse 5 and following next week.

Second way to encourage you, here. It's just with this, it really doesn't matter how we feel about this, about ourselves, about how deficient we think we are, about how we're not up to the task. Jesus is giving us commands to obey, not suggestions to consider. If they were suggestions to consider, listen, we'd have to wrestle quite a bit with this, but when it's a clear-cut command, pretty simple, isn't it? March forward. Our job is just to obey what he says. We leave the results to God. So that makes it very simple. Let me encourage you with this: it's simple.

Third thing to encourage you with is if we'll simply obey him, consider what good comes out of this. When we practice biblical confrontation, you know what happens? We become better at it. We're tested in the crucible of confronting sin, and we, we grow more mature. We're able to see where we do and don't display the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We're able to grow in manifesting this fruit of the Spirit. And not only that, but



when we just practice this among one, one another, our entire church blesses and benefits when we simply obey him. Consider the good and just get into the practice.

Consider a medical doctor. I'm not saying this by any personal experience at all, but I've just seen what they've had to study. It takes four years or so to earn an undergraduate degree and, you know, usually in pretty tough subjects, chemistry, science, all those kind of things. And another four years of medical school or so followed by three to seven years of a medical residency. I'm not great at math, but I think that's like 11 to 15 years of preparation.

After all that, that's when a doctor starts to what? Practice medicine. He practices medicine, then, for the rest of his life. And what does the doctor do? He doesn't have it all when he walks into the office. He practices on you and on me. But after making a few mistakes on us, he kind of starts to get it right. So you want to find that doctor in his, like, late fifties to sixties, somewhere in there. But he's maturing in wisdom, isn't he? He's increasing his competency. He's keeping

up on the latest journals. He's refreshing his skills. He's deepening and broadening his ability.

Same thing with us, beloved. Consider yourselves medical doctors in the field of practicing biblical confrontation. Practice it. As our brother's keeper, when we practice biblical confrontation, we're going to grow in our skill in, over the course of our Christian lives.

And when we do loving obedience to Christ, out of loving concern for one another, God will bless our fellowship. He'll grow us into a mature body. We have got a healthy immune system that protects against stumbling blocks and purges out the impurities, but also promotes health, growth, maturity, and strength. And beloved, I've seen this in our midst, in our church. I've seen you practicing this, and I just got to say excel still more, and let's see what the Lord does among us. Let me commit all this to prayer because that's really what we need, is to go to the Lord and have him work through us.

# PILLAR OF —TRUTH—



Our Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, that you sent him to teach us, to help us, to help us to understand, help us to understand what a church is, what our role is as a member of a body. We're so thankful that we belong to you by grace. Lord Jesus, we thank you for this particular block of instruction, how you have not left us alone without instruction, but you teach us. You are our abiding truth teacher. You don't leave us alone like orphans, but you have sent the abiding, indwelling Holy Spirit to guide and direct us and teach us, lead us into all truth.

So thank you so much. We see the triune God oriented toward our benefit, and we are the recipients of your grace. We just pray that you would help us to have the temerity, the strength, the courage, the faith to trust you to do what is, what you're calling us to do here, that we wouldn't err on one side or the other, but that you'd keep us straight down the middle. By your grace, we know that's what you'll do.

And even when we are overzealous on the one hand or we're timid on the other, we know that you will help us in our errors, our mistakes, our sins. You'll pick us up, dust us off, and set

us on the right path again, and you use one another to do it. We look forward to practicing that together. Just ask that you give us great encouragement in doing so. Bless our fellowship and bless this, bless this beloved church. Let us be faithful to you in Jesus' name. Amen.