

My Brother's Keeper, Part 6

Luke 17:5-10

Open your Bibles to Luke 17 and today we are following up on a two-part series that we've called, My Brother's Keeper, which is the first. It's in the first ten verses Luke 17:1-10. After Jesus addressed the Pharisees at the end of the 16th chapter, we've seen that he has turned to his disciples and he speaks to them with concern. Because hell is real. Because hell is horrible. Because it's unforgiven sin that takes us there. Jesus is keen to warn his disciples.

He tells them that we don't ignore the sin we see. We don't ignore it in our own lives. We don't ignore it in our families. We don't ignore it in our church. We deal with the sin. We confront the sinner. We rebuke the sin. We remove the stumbling blocks from our midst. And we are always ready and eager, standing by, ready to forgive every penitent, humble, contrite, believer.

Let's check out the text again. We'll start in verse 1 and read all the way through verse 10. "And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 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.

"Pay attention to yourselves! 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.

"The Apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' And the Lord said, 'If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Will any," of you, "anyone of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he's come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at the table?' Will you 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? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we've only done what was our duty.'"

We won't go back to where this starts, where we're gonna pick up from last week. The Apostles request in verse 5. There are times in scripture, in the Gospels, where the Apostles say things that seem to be, at first glance, to be a little bit dull, right? They seem to reveal, a, a lack of spiritual perception on their part, or maybe betray a lack of faith or a weakness in faith, or reveal a heart of fear and doubt. This is not one of those times.

This request, "Increase our faith", is right in the ballpark. This is, they're thinking properly, they're thinking righteously, they're thinking submissively, to what Jesus has just taught them, but they're reflecting on the difficulty of it. This is actually quite a perceptive request, because this is a matter of faith. It's a matter of believing the Lord and then

doing what he says. But they can see, you might say the devil is in the details, on this whole confronting sin business.

They're obviously a bit apprehensive, as they think about how this might go down. Maybe, as they reflect back on past experiences and think about how it has gone down, been difficult. The Apostles, all of them, by the way, are men, after all. And it's been my observation about the male half of the human race that we're pretty keen to keep relational drama to an absolute minimum.

We don't like it, makes us uncomfortable, makes us use like, words and such, and language, and have to talk things through. I don't wanna stay. We wanna get out of that business. So, these guys see trouble ahead. Not only that, but we have to remark that several of these men, a third of the Apostles at least, are professional fishermen.

What do fishermen do? They get away, right? Fishermen. What fisherman do you know who is eager to get into drama? Isn't the whole point of fishing to get away from drama, to escape the

human race for a bit and just deal with fish in a lake. And by the way, the fish are hidden from their sites, so they don't have to deal with wiggly fish. Get some peace. Quiet. Escape conflict.

Proverbs 26:17 says, "Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears," and who wants to do that. That's what confronting sin looks like to them, and to many, it's just asking for trouble. But here are the Apostles. They don't refuse. They don't reject. They're pressed into service by the Lord's command. Notice, by the way, how Luke uses that title, Lord, twice, once in verse 5, once in verse 6.

The Apostles here recognize Jesus' authority. They see him as Lord. They see this as a command. It's not optional. It's not a suggestion. They, also, were intuitive enough to see the threat of those who can cause stumbling. I mean, they've got a example, living, breathing right in front of them, in the Pharisees.

Jesus has just confronted them. Those who cause stumbling like Pharisees and scribes and those people who represent the organized leadership of Jewish religion. They could see how those people, because they have already come into their midst, they could see how in the future they'll infiltrate their number. They'll pollute their fellowship.

And these are men, after all. They're designed by God to protect the weaker, to protect the more vulnerable, in their midst. And, so, they get it. They embrace it. They accept it. But they're gonna need a little more ammo. That's what they see. They see the need for an increase of faith. So, the Apostle's request here is perceptive. They anticipate the challenges involved in, in rebuking sin and, all at the same time, in forgiving repeat offenders.

They see the challenges in identifying friend and foe, in their midst, and Jesus' response to them basically is this, steady on boys, steady on. Your job is just to obey and keep on obeying. God will do all the work; you just keep at it. He will accomplish amazing things, in and through your simple faith and

obedience. He'll accomplish seemingly impossible things in and through you, through your simple obedience and trusting my word.

Basically, this text, that's what he tells them. But let's see how this fleshes out just a little bit further. We're gonna cover the ground this morning by dividing the text, verses 5 through 10 into two points. Let me get into point one, verses 5 and 6. Point one is this: Remember the power of God. This is for you. This is what he's saying to them, summing it up, but I'm saying it to you. Remember the power of God, verses 5 and 6.

Remember the power of God. Don't focus on your own weakness, limitation. Don't focus on the challenges. Put your eyes and attention instead on the power of God. There are two reasons the Apostles said to the Lord, "increase our faith." Two reasons I can discern anyway, but both of them having to do with human liability and human limitation.

We're, we're a lot like this, aren't we, when we're called to obedience. When we're called to exercise faith in some spiritual endeavor. When we're called to build the church, and

strengthen and serve the church. When we're called to equip the Saints together. When we're given special privileges and tasked with special duties, in the church. We take stock of our own resources. What we have available in the account. Whether it's time, or energy, or money, or whatever it is.

We take stock of our resources. What we have to get the job done. We have to get the work done. How often, when we do that accounting, do we neglect to factor in the power, infinite almighty, unstoppable power of omnipotent God? We confess great things about God. We learn things about God every single week. But how often when the mundane and normal challenges come up in our life, he's not in our mind.

The Apostles, they're also thinking, like we can tend to think. Not factoring in God, when think about practicing biblical confrontation. All they can see is, fraught with difficulty. So, when it comes to practicing biblical confrontation, the Apostles considered the challenge.



First of all, I could see a couple challenges here, but first of all, as one that's going to require them to keep two, what seems to them, two contradictory postures in balance. There's a hard posture and a soft posture. A hard and a soft way of thinking, that they have to keep in their minds.

On the one hand, Jesus is calling them to vigilance. To have the watchfulness of a soldier. To develop the hard skill of guarding the fellowship, of protecting the weak against potential predators entering into their fellowship. This is the protector mindset. Taking care of the weaker, the more vulnerable among us. This is about protection, and it's a hard skill.

On the other hand, Jesus is also calling them to be abundantly, magnanimously forgiving. This is the softer posture, patience and gentleness, and long-suffering, and overlooking offenses. Forgive the one struggling to overcome sin. Encouraging steps of that penitent sinner toward obedience, being patient always, gentle, tender, kind. Hard and soft skills, a hard and soft posture.

People are people, right? They tend toward one and or the other. Generally speaking, we don't want soft people going to fight our wars overseas. We want them to develop their hard skills and keep on developing them. Sharpening them to a sharp, sharp point, to be the pointy end of the spear; going out and dealing with our enemies.

But you don't want that guy, giving you council about your sin. Coming back from the battlefield and saying, just suck it up and deal with it. What are you, weak, soft? Yeah, they are weak and soft. You need a tender hand there. Both are skills, hard and soft, skills of a shepherd. Shepherd setting, a, an example, The Good Shepherd, setting an example, for all of us as a sheep.

Disciples, ex, see this. Hard, soft skills required. Hard and soft posture required. No one has both of these. No one can keep these two postures, these two skills, which always seem to be in tension with one another, in a proper balance. It must,

this is how it must have seemed, to be to them, and it seemed to be way beyond them. How am I going to bring this together?

If this does express the Apostles concern, I can see how it does. They would need to learn, by observing from their Lord, that these two postures, being hard against sin, being willing to be direct, and confronting proud sinners, but, also, at the same time, soft toward the penitent. Gentle toward the struggling believer.

These two postures are not, at all, in tension with one another. There's no need for balance. As if, these two approaches are in tension. As if, they're competing with one another. They could see by observing their Lord, that these two skills, these two postures, are in complete and true harmony. Why is that? Because this is the heart of love.

This is the heart of love, exemplified in the Lord Jesus Christ; in his words, and his ministry, and his dealing with people, all kinds of people. The love of God incarnate, in Jesus

Christ, was being modeled before them constantly, consistently, always in perfect wisdom, in the life and ministry of the Lord.

Christ was strong, and rigid, and totally inflexible, when he was dealing with sin and proud sinners. But at the same time, he is also soft and gentle in dealing with the humble. He's dealing with penitent sinners, who are coming to him, drawn by his teaching, drawn by his offers of the Gospel and he's so kind. So, kind in dealing with those who seek forgiveness, who seek his help.

So, what may seem to be contradictory postures, the hard and the soft, they are not in tension. They don't need balance. What is required is love, as the Lord has loved. What's required is love. Love for God and love for others. Love for holiness is a love for God and a love for others, and it means a consistent attitude towards sin. A posture that's always ready to purge sin. That is love.

The result of that love is in an unrepenter, unrepentant sinner often leaves the church. The result on the other side

though, is a repenting Christian, who gets rid of his sin. Who grows in holiness. Who grows in joy. Who grows in gratitude. Who grows in all the graces and the virtues of the Holy Spirit, called the fruit of the spirit.

That's the work, to show love. That's love right there, doing the hard yards. And that's what the Apostles were witnessing constantly in Jesus Christ, and that is what they themselves learn to practice in their own ministries. If you want an example of that, read the letter of First John, you'll see this hard and soft posture.

A second challenge, I think, that the Apostles perceived, in practicing biblical confrontation, was just the sheer complexity of it. Just the difficulty that comes when you start to get into the weeds with somebody about their sin. Just, the, the thought of them being drawn into perplexing problems and becoming entangled in a web of what's really mysteries, you know, unclear motives, historical, relational conflicts, bitterness, resentment, a whole history of offenses. And by the way, sinners can be tricky. They don't always tell you everything they're thinking.

The issues of sin are not always obvious. Solutions are not always immediately apparent. Confronting sin can involve motives and intentions of the heart. Things that are hidden from our eyes. Things that only God knows. So, it is understandable, I think, just on a natural human level, why Jesus' command to rebuke the sins we see, to confront what we know, in that, we can be tempted to turn tail and run away. This is especially true, when we try it and we get some blowback from some proud, arrogant, unrepentant person. It seems like we've opened a proverbial can of worms and stuff is crawling around, all over the place and it's like, man, I kind of, if I just never got into that.

So, what's common to both these concerns? What's the common denominator? What ties them together, at the root of these apprehensions of the Apostles, whether it's for the Apostles or whether it's for us. At the root of it, is viewing this through the lens of human limitation, rather than divine power. We flip that around, make sure we're always factoring in the power of God, into the equation.

That's the key: When we consider, always, his will for our behavior, his role in the outcome, his role in bringing the situation into our lives, and before us, in the first place. Is our God not sovereign? Is he not a father, always disciplining and training his children? Is he not training us and strengthening us, for the purpose of holiness? And does he not order our days and order our steps?

Does he not put difficulty before us, in order to train us, of course. You need to remember that, whenever we're tempted to turn tail and run. This is faith. This is when we exercise faith. What are we doing? We're looking not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, 2 Corinthians 4:18. But the things that are seen are transient, temporal, passing away. Of the things that are unseen are eternal, they're fixed, they're permanent, you can rely on them.

So, you might jot this down as a pro tip for living the Christian life: Whenever obedience to God's word seems hard, when obeying Christ seems to be impossible, we're putting way too much focus on our own limitations. Aren't we? Way too much

focus. Does our weakness, or our immaturity, or even our sins, does any of that hinder God?

Does our lack of skill ultimately really matter? Does the complexity of any given problem stymie God? Baffle him? Cause him to ring his hands with anxiety and worry? When we obey God, when we follow his word, when we obey Christ, when we do what our Lord says here, we have enlisted the almighty power of God. Nothing stops him. Which is what the Lord alludes to there in verse 6. Notice that there, the Apostle said, "Increase our faith." And the Lord answered and 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."

Well, this simple answer, this illustration, it's packed with meaning. But it really does answer the questions about obedience, that these Apostles have not yet asked. This is instruction about faith, and an instruction, that really fills in the gaps of what they don't fully understand. But their question is what opened the opportunity for us to hear this from our Lord. So, I praise God for it.



Two key ideas here, in the Lord's answer to them, in verse 6. First, we can see very clearly. We can all see this doesn't take a degree. Faith is not a matter of size. It's not a matter of size. If the faith is there, it's not our matter of size. It's a matter of, what? Exercising it, putting it into practice. Faith isn't a matter of size. You either have it or you don't.

So, if it's there, it's a matter of putting it into practice. It's a matter of exercising faith. It's about using the faith that you have. Jesus makes this inescapably plain by just using a common mustard seed, as an illustration, which was proverbial in their day. It's kind of idiomatic, a saying among them, a mustard seed is proverbial, for its tiny size. The mustard seed itself looks like a kind of a grain of sand or a speck of dust in the palm of your hand. Hardly visible, easily missed, but when that seed is planted, in soil and it's watered, nurtured, the life that's inherent in the seed grows into a plant, that is disproportionately larger than the seed it came from.

Can say that with any seed, right? It's not the size of a seed that matters. It's the presence or absence of the seed, because there is life in the seed. In the right conditions and in the right soil, that seed will do its job. But a mustard seed, among the disciples, among the Apostles, and the people of that land, made the point emphatic. It's among the smallest of seeds, and the tree that grows from it is quite large. You can look it up on the internet and see this large bushy tree that grows out, but the point's clear. It's not about the size of faith. Growth, strength, fruitfulness, these will come, if faith is there, because God's power comes through faith.

Faith is the most primary, the most fundamental of all the graces that God gives us. It's the initial grace that we receive which directs us away from the world, away from our sin, and toward God, toward Christ, toward his righteousness. We return from our sin, repentance. We turn toward God in faith. It's the very first, very first, most primary, fundamental of all the graces. Some call it a self-emptying grace. Self-emptying grace. Why is that? Because faith is, truly, faith is like an empty pipe. It's like a, like a water main. The pipe is only effective

when it's connected to the right source and when it's cleared out of all obstruction.

So, the water main does its job when it's empty of all, but the life-giving water, that it's connected to. That's faith. In the same way, when our faith is in God, when it's connected to the right person, an eternal person with eternal resource. When our faith is in God and when it's free of all obstruction, get all the stuff out of the pipes, all distraction, all sin. The life-giving power of God is at work in our lives to make us strong, and mature, and fruitful. So that's the first point. It's not about size, it's about if you have it or not, and then if you have it, exercise it.