

Part 60: What Will Remain

Stephen Kasun | Luke 17:1-10

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Rudy is a popular film from the 1990's. It's a film beloved by sports fans and athletes for decades. The plot is of a young man who dreams of playing college football for the Notre Dame fighting Irish. The story follows Rudy as he works incredibly hard to get into the school, to make the team's practice roster, and eventually finds his way on the field for the last play of the last game of his senior year at Notre Dame, where he sacks the Georgia Tech quarterback. He's then carried off the field, to chants of "Rudy. Rudy." The story is beloved because Rudy wasn't big enough, wasn't strong enough, and wasn't fast enough to play at that level of athletics. But through sheer will, hard-work and the kindness and compassion of his teammates, who fight to have him out there, his goal of playing for the Irish is achieved.

For those reasons, it's a wonderful film. That kind of work, that kind of hustle, speaks to us as men and women who strive to achieve something, or to provide for our families. A great story with a great message for kids on how to work hard and set goals. This meritocratic standard is emblematic of how many of us view the world. Even sometimes, to the extent to how people understand God and their relationship to him.

We are taught to work hard, put the maximum amount of effort into our studies and our work, and the outcomes will take care of themselves. This simply isn't how a fallen world works. The reality is, if Notre Dame hadn't been up by two and half touchdowns at the end of the game, Rudy probably wouldn't have made it onto the field.

The text this morning is about doing incredibly hard work, and expecting nothing in return. Jesus warns his disciples about expecting a unique honor or praise for doing difficult, taxing, and tedious work. He wants to prepare his disciples for a life of service to the Lord. A life of service where praise and honor are scarce commodities. Moreover, he warns their prideful hearts, not only that will they likely not have a Rudy moment, but that they shouldn't even long for one.

The Christians faith-filled duty equips them to live out the complete love of Jesus. The hard work Jesus is going to point his people to is a radical forgiving of others, and the unique danger of causing others to sin. Of not being a hindrance to the obedience of other believers. **1) The Complete Love of Jesus, 2) The Faith-Filled Disciple, 3) Duty of a Servant.**

1) The Complete Love of Jesus. Jesus is calling his disciples to posture themselves differently toward one another spiritually. **Luke 17:1-4.** This whole section is a conclusion to a teaching Jesus is doing on the Sabbath, it began all the way back in 14:1. Jesus has been speaking to the pharisees, then his disciples, to the crowds, to sinners and tax collectors. Now he turns to those who follow him, and gives them two specific charges in this text.

There two attitudes Jesus is pointing his disciples towards here. Both of them have to do with their hearts posture toward their brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, the spiritual treatment of other disciples of Jesus. In previous moments in this extended teaching Jesus has spoken about how to treat others physically and practically with the loving-kindness of the Lord. Now Jesus concludes by addressing how they are to treat one another on a spiritual-relational level.

It's broken up into two parts, **1a. Woe to the Offenders, Luke 17:1-2**. Jesus tells them temptations are sure to come. There is an inevitability of temptations to sin for the people of God. This comes in several forms. That can be this fallen broken world, sickness and death can tempt to despair and anger. The world is broken and can provoke. Another source of temptation is our own flesh. The Spirit of God within us is at war with the flesh the Christian was once enslaved to. James says temptation is born in our desires, in our heart of hearts, the longing for satisfaction, comfort, joy, pleasure, and seeking the fulfillment of those desires in places outside the designs of the Lord. We are the source of our temptations. Finally, and what Jesus is speaking to, there is temptation and provocation originating with others. A harsh word from a parent, dangerously cut off in traffic, a motorcycle cop having a bad day, there are provocations to sin from others.

Jesus says, “woe to the one through whom they come!” The reason we lay out all those sources of temptation, is that ultimately, sin still rests on the shoulders of the one who commits. One is not absolved of sin because the temptation came from another. Sin is sin, regardless of where the provocation originated. And yet Jesus is warning his disciples not to be negligent in their interactions with other believers, specifically, these “little ones.”

As we read it, that phrase is often understood to be children. And the warning is then understood to be referring to causing children to sin. But not once in this entire sabbath teaching has Jesus talked about children, the closest would be the prodigal son. And he was old enough to receive his inheritance and spend it frivolously and foolishly. Instead, the little ones are baby believers, new and immature disciples of Jesus. **Luke 15:1-2**. The message of grace, mercy and repentance has penetrated the broken and weak. The little ones are the immature, weak, and new followers of Jesus.

Interesting here, Jesus doesn't tell the disciples the consequences of being a hindrance to other believers. Instead, he simply tells them a course of action whose result would be more favorable than being a stumbling block. Rather than laying out the woe, Jesus says do this instead, it will be better for you and those you tempt. Now I kind of knew what a millstone was, a big rock to crush grain. Generally 4-5 feet in diameter (circular, so tall), a foot thick, and weighed thousands of pounds. So better to be fit with cement shoes and tossed in the ocean to die a horrific death, than be a hindrance to others.

There is a good example of this in the OT. Jeroboam ruled Israel and was an evil king. He was an idolatrous selfish, arrogant, king, and Israel paid the price for his sin of idolatry: **1 Kings 14:14-16**. The strong warning exists because the consequences of sin can be devastating. In the case of Jeroboam, causing an entire nation of God's people to break the first commandment.

You know how easy it is to do this in marriage? Jess and I are going to be celebrating 13 years in August. And we haven't crushed it, as a married couple. There have been some good years and some hard years. But even in the good years, I can't say I've avoided being a hindrance to my wife, and she to me. All it takes sometimes to start a cycle of sin and response is one single word or phrase, said sarcastically or passive aggressively. And what ensues is a petty argument about where the garbage cans should be, or what we're going to do on a Saturday afternoon. The initial mean-spirited remark is sin itself, but the effect of that sin is a hanging curve ball of temptation for Jess to crush with a remark of her own.

Another really easy way to be a hinderance is in parenting. Same principle as in marriage. In fact, there's a reason that Paul literally tells parents in Ephesians 6 not to provoke their children to anger. But even beyond explicit provocation, without saying a word, parents can lead children into destruction by how they live. We are modeling a way of life that they will most likely try and emulate. So what you prove is important to you, by how spend your time, what you spend money on, what takes priority in your life, all of these things are observed and likely emulated. We should be more careful and thoughtful about this.

Stepping outside of the home though, the most prevalent way this shows up in our circles is the flaunting of our liberty. Specifically, our Christian liberty. The issues where we varying convictions on what is right and wrong, what is sinful and what is obedience regarding topics that aren't crystal clear in scripture. **Romans 14:6**. This follows a discourse where Paul is discussing the consumption of the unclean meats in the Mosaic Law. For some faithful, God-honoring Christians, eating that meat violates their conscience. For other faithful, God-honoring Christians, eating that meat is permissible, as the old law has been fulfilled. A point made by Paul here is to place a burden upon the brother who does eat the meat. **Romans 14:15**. So it is incumbent upon the one with the more forgiving conscience not to provoke the one with the more restrictive conscience.

I think we are way too selfish sometimes. Thinking highly of our convictions and opinions on matters such as alcohol, entertainment, social media, birth-control, homeschooling/private schooling/public schooling. And then passing judgement on our brothers and sisters who think differently, but also tempting them to argument, or even to violate their conscience on these issues, for whom Paul says, such things are sin. If it violates your conscience, a conscience shaped by the truths of God's word, it is sin. Perhaps more humility is appropriate when considering these matters, particularly for those whose conscience is broad and gives more allowance. We should rather consider the appropriate sized cement shoes than flaunt the liberty we are so convinced of in our own minds.

From offending others to being offended, Jesus switches focus to the spiritual reaction of his disciples to others sinning against them. **1b) Forgive and forgive and forgive**. He tells them to be on guard. **Luke 17:3-4**. Guard themselves, for as he said in verse 1, temptations are sure to come. Jesus sets up a scenario, where a brother or sister sins against the disciples he is speaking to.

There are actually two commands here, the first gets overlooked. When their brother or sister in Christ sins against them, the first thing they should do it rebuke them. "Rebuke him." It is a command. Think

of rebuking as the opposite of holding a grudge. It's easy to hold a grudge. Someone offends us, or hurts someone close to us, and it's almost like we classify the offender in a different category of human. We despise them, disdain their presence, won't entertain the thought of reconciliation, indefinitely holding the grievance against them.

A rebuke is the opposite. Rather than holding it against them, go to them, and share the concern simply and even gently. Rebuking isn't an arrogant or self-important approach. Frank but gentle, as one theologian puts it. This practice should be common amongst Christians. Why? Because we sin, and we sin against one another. And it is actually loving to approach and be approached when we are living contrary to the way the Lord has commanded us.

There is discernment here. **1 Thessalonians 5:14**. Not everyone, all the time, needs rebuke. It's not as if every time we see sin in our brother the most appropriate response is the frank conversation. Sometimes people are weak, sometimes people are struggling, sometimes people are fainthearted and down. And the most helpful course of action is entering into the struggle, and helping before laying out all the ways they've sinned

Jesus says if they repent, forgive them. If they acknowledge their sin and turn away from it and toward the Lord, forgive them. The word simply means to forsake, to hurl away, to leave alone and disregard. Leave it out of thoughts when you consider this person. It doesn't factor into whether or not you will love them, care for them, or call them brother. It is gone from the equation of how you love and value this person.

Forgive then not once, but seven times. This number seven is significant for two reasons. First is that seven represents completion or fullness. This comes from the way the word 'seven' and the word 'full' are spelt in Hebrew. Both with the exact same letters. As well, God created the cosmos in seven days. Completing and bringing to fullness his creation. Seven could rightly be understood by the disciples here to represent more than actually seven, but indefinite amount. In other words, full or complete forgiveness. Actually later in Luke, Peter is going to call back to this moment, and ask Jesus if he should forgive his brothers sin seven times. And Jesus responds by saying seventy seven times seven.

The second reason the number is significant, there was a regular practice by Jews at this time to forgive three times. In Amos 1 & 2, the prophet speaks of God forgiving evil nations three times, and on the fourth decreeing their punishment and judgement. The logic by the religious leaders was that no one should forgive more than God. So the standard of forgiveness at the time was three. So the standard of forgiveness that the pharisees would hold themselves to, and the aspirational standard of the Jewish people, was likely three.

All in all, Jesus standard of forgiveness for his disciples was far more gracious to the sinner than the standard practice of first century religious people. This makes sense for us. Post NT Christians. Because we have backdrop of grace, not the rabbinical teaching of "forgive and forgive and forgive."

Sin separates. It not only separates us from one another, but it separates us as individuals from God. The latter is a cosmic separation. When we hurt each other, it's a fallen finite creature offending another fallen finite creature. This creates a gap in relationship and community, which is why Jesus calls us to avoid being stumbling blocks, and to forgive each other when we are. But sin between creature and creator is different.

Even a single microsecond of faithless anger or self-confident pride is enough to rip a chasm between me and the infinitely perfect God of the cosmos. That's what happened with Adam and Eve. One mistake. One lapse in judgement. One moment of weakness. And disconnected from the perfect presence of walking with God in the garden, ending in death. Jesus entered flesh that that chasm of separation might be closed.

Jesus presents a new standard of forgiveness to his people. It's not only commanded by Jesus, but it is demonstrated in the gospel. Fundamental to the Christian gospel is a debt paid and forgiveness offered. A chasm bridged by the work of Christ. Here, Jesus, the incarnate son of God, is on his way to Jerusalem to be killed for the sin of his people. He will die a sinners death for those who would call upon him as Lord and King. He pays the sin debt that every Christian will ever owe. And as he dies on the cross, the words out of his mouth, "forgive them Father, for know not what they do."

Compare these two different ideas of forgiveness. On one hand the traditional one that the disciples would have been familiar with, the standard set by rabbinic teaching, an aspiration of three. And on the other the standard set by Jesus not only in word but in deed. Radical forgiveness whose well cannot be emptied. An endless deposit of merciful forgiveness to even the most unworthy.

I would wager that every single person in this room has someone or multiple someone's that we struggle to forgive. Someone who harmed us deeply, or cost us something important. Perhaps they didn't hurt us at all but your spouse, or your child, or your closest friend. What irony, when that lack of forgiveness (which is actually bitterness and anger), comes from a soul who claims to have felt and experienced forgiveness in the gospel. We sing songs about the greatness of God, the mercy of Jesus, that he would forgive a wretch like me. The he would shine into our night, because we are not what we should be. And yet offer no light to those who've wronged us. Because we're special.

If you're holding on to bitterness, and resentment, and rage, and anger toward a brother or sister in Christ, whose repentant and turned the other direction toward faithful obedience, can you truly claim to understand the magnitude of Grace. Can you claim to know the difference between the chasm that separates a wretched sinner from a perfect God, and the micrometers between you and the person you can't let go of rage for?! Oh how we cheapen the gospel when our modeling of it is so narrow and frail!

If this sounds extreme and hard, because it is. It's not a posture that comes natural to our flesh. It takes incredible amounts of effort and diligence and selfless obedience. The disciples recognize this.

2) The Faith Filled Disciple. The disciples recognize the difficulty of what Jesus just discussed.

Especially when their aspiration was forgiveness three times, and likely weren't even reaching that. So the disciples ask for help. **Luke 17:5.**

There is something fascinating happening here. What Jesus has discussed so far is primarily an issue between two Christians. How they are conducting themselves with one another. The default attribute that we would assume is most relevant to how we treat others would be love. The fruit of the spirit that we would strive to increase or be faithful in, would be love. After all its unloving to lack forgiveness. It's unloving to disregard or forget the impact we might have on others by being a stumbling block and a hindrance. But the apostles don't ask for an increase of love. They ask for an increase of faith.

This ties the relational components of our walk with Jesus, not first to love, but to faith. In other words, the way to be more loving with one another isn't by asking the Lord for more love, but for more faith. Loving others begins with faith in God, trust in Jesus, and an embrace the gospel. Sometimes we think that we are loving God by loving others. And to a degree that's fair. It is obedient to love others. There is a spiritual aspect to treating image bearers with the kind of mercy that the Lord lavished upon his people even while we were yet still sinners. But that's not where it begins when we lack love. It begins with faith.

And how does Jesus respond to their request? **Luke 17:6.** Jesus tells them that what little faith they have, is already enough. See the disciples were thinking about their faith in terms of quantity not quality. They thought they didn't have enough faith. We think this way too. If we were just a little bit stronger in our faith, we'd be better evangelists with our neighbors, or more faithful Bible readers, or better forgivers. But Jesus tells them it isn't about the amount of faith they have, because even the smallest amount of faith is enough to do magnitudes more than what he has given them here.

A mulberry tree was a 20ft tall or so, it had an extensive root system. There were standards that they couldn't be planted within 37 feet of a cistern due to the extensive root system. It was a common saying that this tree would remain planted for 600 years. And yet even the 1 mm thick mustard seed worth of faith is enough to uproot and replant this monstrosity. Elsewhere Jesus says the faith of mustard seed can move mountains. Jesus is using hyperbole to make the point that the power of faith is proportionate to the power of that faiths object.

The power of faith has little to do with how much there is. Rather the power of faith is dependent upon the object of that faith. The reason a mulberry tree or a mountain will move when commanded is not because faith invests his disciples with a unique power to do such acts, but because those created objects are obeying their master, the creator God, the one who crafted the cosmos, spoke the tree to life, and carved the mountain from the earth.

The problem for the disciples in their request for faith, wasn't their desire. They were lamenting their weakness. How difficult it would be for their flesh to follow-through on this radical new standard of forgiveness. Their problem wasn't a good-faith longing to live up to the standards of their messiah. Their problem was doubting what they already had in Christ.

This passage isn't about doing great things for the kingdom. It's not a verse to be put on a pair of cleats, or stamped on the wall of a locker room, or etched into a barracks. That emphasis rips Jesus' point out of context. This passage is about the difficulty of ordinary obedience, and the necessity and sufficiency of faith in Jesus and his gospel, to overcome the challenge of living ordinary, faithful lives in this broken world.

When we lack love for one another, our first move should be repentance ourselves. Turning to the Lord, and asking forgiveness for our own lack of gospel driven grace. Our second move should be going to read Luke 17:5-6. Because what we already have in Jesus through the gospel, is enough to accomplish all of the difficult work that God has given his people to do while we serve him on this earth.

3) Duty of a Servant. To put a period on his sabbath sermon, Jesus offers a short parable of a servant and his master. **Luke 17:7-10.** As we read this, undoubtedly it will hit some of us a little awkwardly. First, we don't like the words slaves or servant. It doesn't sit well. That is the word used here its *doulos*. There is another word for servant that's used in the NT, *diakonon*. Which is also translated as servant, and sometimes deacon. A specific role of care and service, never translated as slave. That is not the word used here, *doulos* is. *Doulos* literally means owned by another for a lifetime. Slave.

The second reason this text might rub us the wrong way is when we think about work and employment. We don't want to work for an ungrateful and overly demanding boss. We might interpret this through a professional lens, and be way turned off the Jesus' words, and start thinking in different directions.

We don't like the word slave, and we don't like thinking about the implications of Jesus endorsing slavery. We don't like rude and ungrateful employers, and we don't like to think about the implications of Jesus endorsing that kind of behaviour. That is not what Jesus is doing here. Rather, Jesus is observing the posture of the slave. Because often in scripture, Jesus' disciples and the people of God are referred to as *doulos*, *slaves*, responsible to the Lord. That is slaves of God. Slaves to Christ. **Acts 4:29, Ro 1:1, 1 Cor 7:22.**

This to make the point that the life of the disciple belongs not to himself but to Christ. Remember that miraculous forgiveness offered in the gospel. That forgiveness saves a person from an eternity of suffering. An eternity of suffering apart from the pleasure and joy of walking with our God. That forgiveness offers hope to the hopeless, life for the lifeless, joy to the joyless. Galatians 3 says Jesus bought us with his blood. We are his as much as he is ours.

Therefore, the life of a believer, the life of the Christian is one of service and yes, slavery, to the will and purpose our God. That's a good life. Because the infinite perfect Lord of the Cosmos certainly has better and more fruitful plans than I do.

But what's Jesus emphasizing with the parable? The servants return from keeping the fields and sheep, and rather than praise or honor or rest, they are tasked with yet more work. Which is serving the master his meal. And even after that, Jesus asks this rhetorical question, "Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?" The answer is no. He doesn't. Rather the servant continues his duty diligently and faithfully. Until the end of the day, they have done all that they were required. They then say to themselves, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." End sermon, end sabbath discourse.

The point of this parable is pretty simple. It was a warning against spiritual pride. A warning against the kind of self-righteousness, self-assurance, and self-seeking pride that we so loath in the pharisees we read about. Because the commands Jesus gave at the beginning of the sermon are so much more loving than even what the rabbinic standards, would it not have been so simple, that once a disciple achieved this kind of incredibly difficult forgiveness, to consider himself having done something special? Having done something powerful, and wonderful, and maybe worthy of honor. Maybe worthy of a little rest and reflection.

Jesus says no! He is pointing them away from a spiritual pride in their ability to obey and follow-through on these commands, and he is pointing them towards a duty driven service concerned not with honor and praise but with faithful obedience. Obedience doesn't earn a place before the Lord. Neither does it oblige him to thank us for our service. No our service is a thanks in itself to him! For that infinite chasm that Jesus bridges.

Jesus is calling all of his disciples to a life of service to the mission of the gospel. Every believer. Anyone who would genuinely claim the name Christian. All are to obey and serve. The work of ministry is one to be participated in by every single Christian. Evangelism, discipleship, loving your neighbor with Christlike forgiveness, all of this ministry work is challenging, taxing, and overwhelmingly difficult in the best of circumstances. Look at the word again, Luke 17:7. Plowing and tending sheep...or shepherding.

Shepherding is synonymous with two things in the NT, Jesus as the chief shepherd, think of him leaving the 99 to find the one. His promise to keep the flock. And second it is synonymous with pastoring, eldering, watching over the flock. But it isn't just shepherding he identifies, is it. It's plowing and tilling the fields. The drudging, taxing difficult work of planting and harvesting.

Whatever flavor of ministry we are called to, whatever capacity inside of the church, we are merely *dulous* of the Lord. None of us worthy of honor. And lest we consider us rock starts for having found ourselves faithful to this ministry, Jesus warns us to check our pride at the door. Because in whatever way we have been faithful, it is nothing less we ought to have dutifully done. Why? Because we are 'unworthy' servants.

When we think unworthy, I imagine most of us to our sin. Perhaps thinking about how horrible and selfish and prideful we were before Christ. Or even the vices that grip our hearts despite having known

the grace and mercy of Jesus. We most often feel unworthy in our sin, as we are face to face with our flesh. But Jesus flips that here.

Unworthiness is tied to the faithful duty of the servant. For “we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.” Because even the best we have to offer our God, is nothing less we ought to have given in the first place. Again, what we’ve already been given in Christ Jesus, is more than enough in return. We could never offer a service to God that would even begin to repay the debt Jesus paid on behalf of the Christian. This isn’t to get us down into despair. To the feeling worthless, useless, and like life is a pointless slog from nothing to nothing. Because, *again*, for the Christian, we already have Christ.

If you’re here, having sat through this sermon, and heard that phrase, “for the Christian” you may be wondering what about me. If you’ve received these words of Jesus, and they start to make some sense, you’re wondering what does this text offer you. The answer is nothing less than the perfection of that radical forgiveness Jesus is calling his followers to embody. If your not a believer and you feel the weight of a life lived serving only yourself, or even others, and you are beginning to glimpse something pointing to a greater purpose, the point of this text for you is that 1mm wide mustard seed of faith. Trust in the radical, perfect and full forgiveness of Jesus. Love for him above all. Because he is worthy. And while Christians may not always practice what we preach, Lord knows I struggle deeply with what we’ve talked about today, Jesus always practiced what he preached. He offered life to the thief that died next to him on a cross. He forgave that wretched man despite his life of selfishness. He offers that to you too.

I want to close the morning with an excerpt from the book *The Hiding Place*. The book is written by Corrie Ten Boom, with help, and it’s about her life as a middle-aged Dutch watchmaker. She and her family helped Jews hide from the Nazis during World War 2. She tells stories of their illegal, underground activities to protect people in the hiding place, a room in their home. Eventually Corrie and her family are arrested and sent to a concentration camp. It’s a beautiful story about reconciling their illegal activity with their identity as Christians, all to protect innocent and persecuted people.

In the book, Corrie tells of her Tante Jans, her aunt. She was a widow, who spent her widowed years doing everything she could to serve the Lord. Serving the poor, evangelizing, arguing for the propriety and holiness of Christians in society, she is described in the book that she may be trying to earn her place before the Lord. She is diagnosed with diabetes, and even more fervently seeks to serve her God. A blood test comes back to Corrie and her Father, and with not treatment at the time they have to break the news to her aunt. This is from chapter 3 of the book, *The Hiding Place*.

And so the little procession filed up the steps to Tante Jans’s rooms. “Come in,” she called to Father’s knock. And added as she always did, “and close the door before I catch my death of drafts.”

She was sitting at her round mahogany table, working on yet another appeal for her soldiers’ center. As she saw the number of people entering the room, she laid down her pen. She looked from one face to another, until she came to mine and gave a little gasp of

comprehension. This was Friday morning, and I had not yet come up with the results of the test.

“My dear sister-in-law,” Father began gently, “there is a joyous journey which each of God’s children sooner or later sets out on. And, Jans, some must go to their Father empty-handed, but you will run to Him with hands full!”

“All your clubs...,” Tante Anna ventured.

“All your writings...,” Mama added.

“The funds you’ve raised...,” said Betsie.

“your talks...,” I began.

But our well-meant words were useless. In front of us the proud face crumpled; Tante Jans put her hands over her eyes and began to cry. “Empty, empty!” she choked at last through her tears. “How can we bring anything to God? What does He care for our little tricks and trinkets?”

And then as we listened in disbelief she lowered her hands and said, with tears still coursing down her face, whispered, “Dear Jesus, I thank You that we must come with empty hands. I thank You that You have done all—all—on the cross, and that all we need in life or death is to be sure of this.”

It is not about what we offer Christ, but what he has given us. “All that we need in life or death is to be sure of this.” Let live in the ordinary obedience of forgiveness, that we may arrive at heavens gate, and hear those wonderful words, “well done good and faithful *dulous*.”