**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THREE MARKS OF FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS**

**Luke 17:1-10**

**INTRODUCTION**

Recently, we’ve talked a lot about what it means to *become* a Christian. A little earlier in our Luke series in Luke 15, we looked at three of Jesus’ most well-known parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons, which focus on that topic, and we saw that one of the things people need in order to become Christians is repentance. We need repentance, along with faith, to be brought into a relationship with God. God helps us repent, like the shepherd going after the lost sheep and carrying it back to the flock on his shoulders, and yet repentance is also our choice, like the prodigal son who returned home acknowledging his sin and asking his father to take him back in. Repentance involves God coming after us, and us coming after God.

We’ve also talked a lot about what it means to become a Christian at our King’s World music camp outreach last week. We talked about faith, and we talked about repentance, because we want these kids and their families to enter into a personal relationship with God through Christ. We want them to know that Jesus died on a cross in the place of sinners like you and me so that God’s wrath against our sin could be satisfied and we could be adopted as the very children of God. This is the good news of the gospel, and we emphasized the gospel again and again last week, because it’s only by hearing and believing the gospel that we can be saved.

Most of us know, however, that becoming a Christian isn’t the end of the story. It’s only the beginning, because the gospel isn’t just about how we can be saved. It’s about how we are to live once we are saved. Being a Christian isn’t only about justification (being declared righteous). It’s about sanctification (actually becoming righteous). We are justified so that we can be sanctified. One flows out of the other, but both are centered on the gospel. Becoming a Christian and living as a Christian both depend on what Christ accomplished for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

This is one of the reasons why Jesus follows up the three parables about the lost being found with Chapters 16 and 17. These chapters move on from the question of, “How do I become a follower of Jesus?” to the equally important question of, “Once I’m a follower, what does it actually mean to follow Jesus?” Jesus began to answer this question in Luke 16, where the entire chapter is devoted to Jesus’ teaching about money. He says in essence that Christ-followers will handle money in a radically different way than the non-Christian world, because they’re no longer living for worldly wealth. They’re living for God, which frees them up to use their money in radically generous ways.

And now, here in Chapter 17, Jesus teaches us three additional things about what it means to live as a Christian.

**Read Luke 17:1-10**

The title of this message is **Three Marks of Faithful Christians.** In our text, Jesus uses a series of three contrasts to highlight these three marks of faithful Christians, and they will serve as our outline today:

1. **TEMPTERS AND THE TEMPTED**
2. **SEEDS AND TREES**
3. **SERVANTS AND MASTERS**

(1) **TEMPTERS AND THE TEMPTED**

Luke begins verse 1 by telling us that Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He’s not speaking to the Pharisees, or to curious onlookers, or to potential followers. He’s speaking to those who have already aligned themselves with him as his disciples. If you’re a Christian, then you know that every part of the Scriptures is profitable for us to know God better and grow more like Jesus, but when Jesus addresses his disciples, we need to open our ears a little more and pay close attention, because our Lord is speaking directly to us.

And what does Jesus say? Look at verse 1: “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!”

Notice that there are two people in this verse: there’s the tempter, and there’s the tempted. To the tempted, Jesus says, “Temptations are coming your way. There’s no doubt about it. You can count on it. And the way you’re going to be tempted is through other people.” When we think about temptation, we mostly think about how our hearts are responding to our circumstances. We see something really nice on Amazon and it tempts us to envy or covet, or we’re having a really rough time at home with the kids and we’re tempted to become angry or complain.

But here in verse 1, Jesus is telling us that we’re not only tempted when our hearts respond to our circumstances. We’re tempted when our hearts respond to people: from their words, their actions, and their examples. Sometimes it’s obvious, like when a person comes up to you and offers you some drugs, or encourages you to lie, or seduces you to be unfaithful to your spouse. Other times it’s more subtle. I was once speaking to a young person who had recently seen many friends abandon their faith in Christ, and this person couldn’t help but think, “Am I missing out by remaining as a Christian? Are these friends of mine getting something that I’m not? Maybe life is better without Christ. Maybe all this talk about taking up my cross and following Jesus just isn’t worth it.” Temptation can look like that as well. Jesus says that these kinds of temptations are “sure to come”, and when they do, you need to be ready for them.

Jesus then sets his gaze on the tempter in verse 1. He says, “Woe to the one through whom they come!” “Woe” was an exclamation of pain and pity for the misfortunate that awaited someone. It would be like saying, “I am so sorry for what’s coming to you.” And what is it that’s coming? 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.” Jesus is saying that judgment is coming for the tempter, a judgment so gruesome that it would be better to drown to death with a heavy stone tied around your neck than to face the judgment that’s coming.

Now you may be thinking, “I would never do that. I would never tempt someone else to sin.” You don’t think so? Well, Jesus thinks so. Jesus says in verse 3, “Pay attention to *yourselves*.” And who is he talking to? The disciples! These warnings are for Jesus’ disciples. If you say you’re a Christian today, then you need to recognize that these warnings are for you. You’re not just the tempted person here. You could very well become the tempter in verse 1 unless you start paying careful attention to your walk with God.

Now if you’ve played the part of the tempter, whether recently or in the more distant past, you may be feeling all sorts of things right now. Perhaps you’re reading verse 2 with mild interest, thinking, “Oh, that’s an interesting little illustration.” Or perhaps you’re reading verse 2 with unbelief, saying, “That’s never going to happen to me.” I don’t know what you’re feeling, but I can tell you what you should be feeling: fear. If you’ve been tempting others to sin, you’re supposed to read the warnings of judgment in verse 2 with fear.

If you don’t feel fear, you’re doubting one of two things. You’re doubting that Jesus is telling the truth, or you’re doubting that the Scriptures accurately capture what he said, and if either one is the case, you and I need to have a conversation later on. But if you believe that Jesus is true and the Scriptures are true, then you should be feeling fear right now. You should be thinking, “What have I done? And what have I gotten myself into? What kind of judgment is waiting for me?”

Well, the bad news is that if you keep playing the part of the tempter without changing the way you’re living, there’s no hope for you. Your fate is sealed, and judgment is coming.

But the good news is that *if you repent, your sins will be forgiven and you’ll never see the judgment that you deserve*.

We’ve spoken at length about what repentance is on previous occasions, so I won’t get into detail now, but a simple definition of repentance is that it’s a change in worship that leads to a change in behaviour. When you repent, you stop treating the things that were tempting you to sin as if they were god, as if they meant everything to you, and you start treating God like God instead. It could be that you value possessions so much that you’re often envious or greedy, or it could be that you value approval so much that you live in the fear of man rather than the fear of God. Whatever it is, repentance means that you re-center your life around God rather than things that aren’t God.

If you’ve played the part of the tempter, there is hope for you, but only if you repent. There is hope because Jesus has died for the sins of those who repent of their sins and turn to him in faith. The judgment you deserve, the judgment that’s so much worse than drowning with a heavy stone around your neck, was placed on him instead on the cross, where he actually suffered that judgment. If you turn to Christ in repentance and faith, your sins will be forgiven and you will never see judgment no matter how black your sins may be.

So, to the tempter, Jesus says “repent”, and now he turns back to the tempted and says “rebuke and forgive”. Look at verse 3: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”

Every time you see someone else’s sin, you’re going to be tempted to sin. That’s implied in our text, but it’s said much more clearly by Paul in Galatians 6:1:

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1)

When you see someone else’s sin, you could be tempted in a variety of ways. You could be tempted to sin in the same way as you start thinking, “Hey, if they’re doing it why shouldn’t I?” You could be tempted to self-righteousness and think, “I can’t believe they did that. *I* would never do that.” Or you could be tempted to stop trusting in God and think, “If God allowed that person to fall so far and so hard, he must be unfaithful to his people.”

And then, to make things worse, when the sin is against you personally, a whole other world of temptation opens up. You feel angry every time you think about that person and you start hoping that bad things will happen to them. Or perhaps you simply stop caring. Your reaction isn’t anger. It’s apathy. It’s not “How could they do that!” any more, but “Whatever. They can do what they want.”

Jesus says both are wrong. Both anger and apathy are equally sinful. Instead of showing apathy, we need to rebuke the one who sins, which is something that an apathetic person would never do. And instead of showing anger, we need to forgive the one who repents, which is something that an angry person would never do.

And notice what Jesus says in verse 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.” Forgiveness isn’t optional. It’s *required* for those who follow Jesus. He says, “You *must* forgive him. No “ifs”. No “buts”. Forgiveness is something you *must* do.” It doesn’t matter if you’re tired of forgiving the person because you’ve already done it a hundred times, but they just keep sinning against you and hurting you. If they repent, you forgive, whether it’s seven times a year, or seven times a day.

Why? Because that’s what God does for us. We sin against him way more than seven times a day, but he forgives those who repent of them all. God forgives without limit. If you repent, He will never turn you away and say, “Sorry, you’ve met your forgiveness quota for the day.” Instead, he will say, “Come to me as many times as you need to, and I will forgive you every time, because my Son has paid for *all* your sins.”

God has forgiven us of our sins against him, and now he wants us to forgive those who sin against us. We must forgive without limit because we have been forgiven without limit, and the more we grasp that, the easier forgiveness will come.

This is the first mark of the faithful Christian. Faithful Christians repent when they sin and rebuke and forgive when they’re sinned against.

(2) **SEEDS AND TREES**

The second mark of faithful Christians is found in a contrast between seeds and trees in verses 5 and 6, which say, “The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ 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.’”

This contrast between seeds and trees comes in response to the apostles’ request that Jesus increase their faith. It’s unclear whether this request is related to what Jesus just taught about forgiveness. It may be that the apostles felt that they didn’t have enough faith to believe that a person could sin seven times a day and still be genuinely repentant, which is why they asked Jesus to increase their faith. While that may be true, we don’t have enough in our text to confidently conclude that this is the text’s intent.

Instead, this seems to be a general, open-ended request from the apostles that Jesus increase their faith, not only in the context of relationships with other people, but in every context, because faith is an essential part of following Christ.

What is faith? A good synonym for faith is trust. When you have faith in someone, you’re trusting them to do something. If you say you have faith in your son or daughter when they’re facing a difficult decision, you’re saying that you trust them to make a wise decision. If you say you have faith in the pew that you’re sitting on, you’re saying that you trust that pew to hold you up when you sit on it. And when you have faith in God, you’re saying that you trust him to do all that he says he will do.

So if God says your sins are forgiven through the death of his Son, faith says, “I trust God’s promise of forgiveness and believe it even if I don’t feel it.” If God says that he will provide for all your needs, faith says, “I trust that God will always take care of me and my family.” And if God says that he has the power to do miracles, whether it’s healing sickness or calming a storm, faith says, “I trust that God can do all things.”

Faith isn’t just a concept. It completely changes how you live. If you live by faith, you’re not going to fear when you unexpectedly lose your job or a medical diagnosis throws off all your plans. You have peace, because you know that God is faithful to care for you. Faith is what keeps us from despairing when we confront our sin. Those who have faith don’t run away from Christ when they sin. They run towards him instead, because they trust his promise to forgive.

Faith affects how we live, but it also does something else. It affects what God does in us and through us. Faith is like the conduit that channels God’s power to us. Luke’s already addressed this multiple times in his gospel. Faith is the reason why Jesus said that multiple people were healed, including the paralyzed man and the centurion’s servant. Faith is the reason why Jesus says that the sins of the woman who poured perfume on his feet were forgiven. And faith, or more accurately the lack of faith, is the reason why Jesus rebuked the disciples during the storm on the Sea of Galilee and when they failed to heal the demon-possessed boy.

God’s power is manifested when faith is present, but it’s hidden when faith is absent. God does more through his people when his people have faith, and he does less when they don’t.

And so, it was quite natural for the apostles to ask for more faith in verse 5. “Increase our faith!” they asked, because they wanted greater trust *in* God, and they wanted to do greater works *for* God.

There’s nothing wrong with that request. More faith is something that we should be asking God for regularly. We should want to keep growing in our faith, so that we trust God more, and so that God does more through us.

But the main lesson here is found in verse 6, where Jesus says, “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.’” Jesus is saying don’t underestimate the power of just a little bit of faith! Yes, your faith needs to grow, but you don’t need much of it for God to do great things through you. Just a little bit of faith is needed for God to use you in powerful ways.

Jesus chooses a dramatic way to illustrate this by contrasting the mustard seed and the mulberry tree in verse 6. The mustard seed was the smallest common seed at the time. It was only about 1-2 mm in diameter. The mulberry tree, on the other hand, was a strong, deep-rooted tree that had such a vast root system that it could live up to six hundred years in the harsh climate of the Middle East.

So say you wanted to pluck that tree up. Not only that, say you wanted to transport that tree to the sea, bury it under water, and plant it there under all that water using nothing but faith. That would be a miracle, wouldn’t it? It would be an *amazing* miracle! Surely, we might think, only a faith champion would be up to the task, someone whose faith is just rippling with strength and potency?

Jesus says “no”. You don’t need to be a faith champion to do great things for God. You just need to have a little, no more than the size of a mustard seed. We must ask God for more faith, but we must not forget that the little faith we already have can work wonders in the world.

This is the second mark of a faithful Christian. Faithful Christians have a world-shaking, ever-increasing faith in God.

(3) **SERVANTS AND MASTERS**

The last mark of a faithful Christian is found in verses 11-19 where Jesus contrasts servants and masters to highlight something very important about the kind of attitude that faithful Christians are meant to have.

The illustration is simple enough. Jesus asks in verse 7, “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’?” He asks the same question in a different way in verse 9: “Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?” Notice that these are both rhetorical questions. Jesus asks the questions but doesn’t wait for the answers because the answers were obvious. Of course not! No master would wine and dine his servants or thank them just because they did their jobs.

Now, from our Western, 21st century perspective, the answer may not be so obvious, because we don’t live in a culture with servants and masters. The closest analogy we have is the relationship between employers and employees, but that’s not quite the same, because employees have rights. Servants didn’t. Employees have rights when it comes to vacations. They have rights to bonuses and minimum wages. They have the right to leave the company whenever they want. Servants, on the other hand, weren’t entitled to anything. They couldn’t even leave if they wanted to, because they belonged to their master like property.

So when we read Jesus’ question about who would invite their servants to dine with them after they finished their work in the field with our Western, 21st century eyes, we may be inclined to think, “Well Jesus, I might have done that. I might have invited my servant to come in and recline at the table with me after he worked hard all day plowing or keeping sheep. It would be inhumane to ask him to keep working after such a long day.”

We need to recognize that, while this may be how Western, 21st century people like us think, it’s not how Middle-Eastern, 1st century people thought. Servants didn’t have rights. They only had responsibilities.

So when we read this illustration, we have to try really hard to hear the question and think of the answer not from Western, 21st century eyes, but from Middle-Eastern, 1st century eyes. And when we do that, the answer to the questions in verses 7 and 9 is “no”. No master would reward his servant just for doing his job. Instead, the master would respond in the way Jesus describes in verse 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?’” The master will continue to require the servant to serve until all his responsibilities have been fulfilled, and only then would he be permitted to tend to his own needs.

What’s the point of all this? Is Jesus just giving us a fascinating history lesson in the socio-economic dynamics of the master-servant relationship? No, there’s an important point to all this, and it’s found in verse 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.’”

It appears that Jesus’ 1st century audience wasn’t so different from us after all, at least when it came to God. They were starting to think of themselves as employees with rights rather than servants with responsibilities. “God owes us for our service”, they thought. “If we do everything he says we should do, we’re entitled to get things from him.” It could be prosperity. It could be health. It could be children. It could be possessions. Whatever it was, Jesus’ 1st century audience believed that God owed them if they did what he said.

But here in verse 10, Jesus is saying, “God owes you nothing. Don’t forget who you are, and don’t forget who God is. God is first and foremost your master, and you are first and foremost his servant. You owe him everything, and he owes you *absolutely nothing.*”

Now the question for us today is, have you started to believe that God owes you for your obedience? Perhaps you regularly give money to the church or to the needy, and you’ve started thinking that God owes you. Maybe you think he owes you your job, or a better job than you currently have. Or perhaps you’re just coming off a really busy and tiring season of serving God and you want to reward yourself with that new TV or car or piece of furniture you’ve been eyeing for so long and you think, “Why not? After all, God owes me after all the work I just did for him.”

If that’s how you think, then don’t forget that there’s no reward for doing what God commands. Giving your money away is a *command*. Serving God is a *command*. Spending our lives for God is a *command*.God requires these things for us, and we don’t deserve praise or reward for obeying his commands any more than a servant in the 1st century.

This is the third mark of a faithful Christian. Faithful Christians have a servant heart. Having a “servant heart” is a term we’re pretty familiar with. We talk about having a servant heart all the time. But what Jesus is getting at here is that having a servant heart doesn’t just mean that you’re doing a lot of serving. You can serve without having a servant heart if you believe that God owes you for your service. A true servant heart faithfully serves with zero expectation of praise or reward. A true servant heart doesn’t say, “I’m a worthy servant, and God’s going to reward me.” It says “I’m an unworthy servant, and I have only done my duty.”

But here’s the amazing thing: God may not owe us reward, but he generously decides to give it to us anyways. We’ve seen that over and over again in Luke’s gospel. Jesus talks about how we are storing up *treasures in heaven* when we give to the needy. He says that when we’re persecuted for our faith, we should rejoice because our *reward* is great in heaven. And he says that when we join him at the end of time in the fullness of his kingdom, we will recline and eat with him at his great wedding feast.

God owes us nothing, but he generously gives us everything, because that’s the kind of God he is.

**CONCLUSION**

Let me conclude by leaving you with some questions to consider.

If one of the marks of a faithful Christian is that they rebuke and forgive those who sin against them, the question I want to ask you today is, do you even have those kinds of relationships in your life? One of the signs of someone who is struggling with forgiveness is that they start shutting other people out. They’ve been hurt so much that they decide that no one’s ever going to hurt them again, so they distance themselves from real relationships. They may know a lot of people, but they keep everyone at arms-length so that no one’s ever sinning against them, and therefore there’s no one to rebuke and forgive.

Relationships are messy. Get close to people and it’s only a matter of time before they hurt you. Some of them will hurt you really badly. But that’s part of the Christian life. Following Jesus means being a part of all the joys and sorrows of being a part of his people. If you want to faithfully follow Jesus, then you need to have relationships that are deep enough that you’ll need to rebuke and forgive.

The second question I have for you is, when’s the last time you worked on your faith? We work on all sorts of things. We build up our work skills. We try to keep our bodies fit. We try to become more patient people. But do we try to become more faith-filled people? Faith is something that needs to be built. Yes, faith like a mustard seed has the power to move mountains, but just imagine what faith like a watermelon could do. Let’s build our faith by praying for it, and by reading God’s promises and intentionally saying to God, “I trust you to keep your promises.”

My last question for you is this: when you think about God, and his relationship to you, what words come to mind? Loving Father? Merciful Judge? Wise Counsellor? All these things are true, but we’re not thinking about God accurately if we don’t also think of him as Sovereign Master. God is our Master, and we are his servants. We need to remember that, because if we do, we’ll see that all the blessings he pours out on us now, and all the blessings he will pour out on us in the future, don’t come to us because of who we are or what we’ve done. They come because of who he is and what he has done, and the more we grasp that, the more we will love our great God.