

2 October 2022

Luke 17:5-10 Pastor Fraser Pearce

This is how our text begins: **The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'**

But why are they saying this?

What has just been happening?

Well, if we go to the previous verses we read these words

Of Jesus to his disciples: **If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'**

OK, let's break this up and think about what Jesus is saying.

If another disciple sins,

Literally, if a brother sins.

That is, if another member of the church sins.

There can be power imbalances, like with the 'little ones'

That we talked about last week, and that in fact begins Luke 17.

In such cases special care needs to be exercised by those in authority.

But Jesus here is speaking most clearly about what happens

When a brother or sister, someone on our level, sins.

Jesus says, **If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender,**

To rebuke means to call out, to correct.

So: we must not stew on it, or gossip about it,

But go to our brother or sister and speak.

Now the Golden Rule is: treat others as you'd like to be treated.

So this teaching about rebuking calls us to exercise our imaginations,

And to think about how we'd like to be confronted.

This can help us act in humility and gentleness

As we step up in courage to speak.

Jesus then says , **and if there is repentance, you must forgive.**

If the person acknowledges their fault, we must forgive.

This does not mean that we are free to be bitter and vengeful

If they do not repent,

But it does mean that our forgiveness cannot reach its goal
In achieving reconciliation,
Unless they turn back from their sin.

Jesus then takes his teaching up a notch. He says, **And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'**

You must keep on forgiving...

It's not too hard to think how this 'seven times a day'
Might actually happen.

Consider someone who has grown up
Habitually using foul language,
Or falling into some other offensive behaviour.

We might have a clear and gentle word with them,
They might say sorry with real sincerity,
But then fall back into the same behaviour.

Jesus commands us: as they say sorry again, we should forgive again.
Could it happen that we ourselves might repeatedly fall into sins,
That we sincerely regret,
But which causes offence to others?

Anyway, it is response to this teaching that the apostles say to Jesus,
'Increase our faith!'

Now this might seem like a reasonable response –
After all, such a willingness to forgive takes super human strength.
More than this, the Lord has spoken to his disciples before this
And has said these words to them, 'O you of little faith'
So it seems that the problem with Jesus teaching might not be its truth,
But the faith we need to live it out.

Well, it's true that Jesus comes to us looking for faith,
For strong faith.

But when we hear Jesus' teaching
We do not need to worry about the strength of *our* faith,
But the trustworthiness of Jesus in keeping *his* word.
Jesus has such power, that he can do his work,
Even if our faith is tiny, and exercised with trepidation.

Listen to how the text develops: **The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.**

Jesus is not asking us to command trees,
Rather he is using visually startling and memorable imagery
To teach us what faith in him can accomplish.
He is saying that even if we act with the smallest faith,
God can work among us what is impossible by human strength.
That when we exercise even the smallest amount of faith
In dealing with conflict in the way that Jesus teaches,
Then we will see the miraculous power of God at work.

Jesus wants his disciples to understand that what he is asking them
When it comes to patient forgiveness of each other,
Is not some special addition to the life of faith,
That it’s not only for those who are taking extra credit
In the kingdom of God,
Rather, it’s part of the basic course, of the core job description.
When we go and speak to each other,
Rebuking each other in a spirit of gentleness;
When we forgive each other
And keep on patiently forgive each other,
We are doing what we simply are meant to be doing
As Jesus’ disciples.

To help us understand this, Jesus puts to us questions: **‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?**

Jesus is not saying this is how we should treat people,
And he’s not saying that slavery is OK.
Rather he’s getting us to think about what it means
To have role, to have a calling,

And to live faithfully in it.

We understand that some people have a job to do,
And when they do it, there's no medals or pats on the head.
It seems possible as well that *ploughing* and *tending sheep*
Are images for the pastoral work of the apostles:
Just because they do their pastoral work faithfully
Does not mean that they are free to live in bitterness and resentment –
They must serve in rebuking each other, in forgiving each other.
It's the core business of Christin disciples.

That's how we should approach the task of seeking reconciliation
In the Christian community: it's core business.

That's why Jesus can wrap up his teaching with these words: **So you also,
when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are
worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"**
We are called by our Lord to deal with conflict in the church this way.
When we live out Jesus teaching,
We are only doing what we are meant to be doing.

If we stopped here we'd have healing teaching from the Lord
That would free us to experience God's power
As we deal with conflict in the church.

But of course Jesus is not simply our teacher, but our Saviour.
If he expects us to deal with sin in the church
By dealing with it directly, and in a spirit of forgiveness,
If Jesus expects us to be patient in forgiving,
Then we can trust that he will be patient with us,
That he will forgive us, even if we turn back to him
Seven times in one day.

So may God give us his Spirit, so that we exercise the faith we have,
So that we speak to our brothers and sisters when they sin,
So that we do so in a spirit of gentleness and humility,
So that we forgive each other from the heart,
And so that we live in the unity of love
That is the community of the one God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
In Jesus' name. Amen.