

WESTLAKE CHURCH LAUSANNE

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## PORTRAIT OF CHRIST'S DISCIPLE

Luke 17:1-10

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Why is Jesus using such strong words and such strong images? Words like 'stumbling blocks', 'woe', 'beware', 'rebuke', and expressions like those in verses 2 and 6 are just not common things we hear every day!

Looking at the passage we just read we could not do otherwise but asking ourselves what is Luke trying to write about and why did he choose to write about these things.

For a better understanding we have to look at the whole context of Luke's gospel. It is worth to notice that out of all three and a half years of Jesus' ministry, Luke chose to present in almost two thirds of his book the events of Jesus' last few months before he went to the cross. In fact, from Luke 9:51 we read that Jesus is ready to go to Jerusalem (*'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.'*). From this chapter 9 until chapter 19, Luke presents the life of Jesus and his encounters with people traveling through Judea, Galilee, Samaria and the desert at east of Jordan. Jesus is not tired of teaching his disciples, admonishing the Pharisees, and giving attention to the crowds by preaching the good news to them and healing them of their diseases.

Looking back at the chapters we have studied in Luke's gospel, we often see Jesus addressing the crowds or multitudes, but getting closer to the end of the gospel, in the last few chapters we have noticed that Jesus talks with much intensity to two groups of people: one group is the Pharisees and other the disciples. The Pharisees are the leading group in Jewish society. They model the cultural, social and religious life in Israel and everybody wants to imitate them, to be where they are and to have what they have.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees were not leading the people in the right direction. They had left aside God's word (law) and instead put forth their own traditions. Instead of helping people to get to God, they were rather a hindrance to the people. They would be so much about their outside appearances that they would neglect the inside appearances - becoming hypocrites. No wonder that Jesus warns the crowds and the disciples to *"do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."*(*Mathew 23:1-3*). He continues in verses 4-7 by unmasking the Pharisees' public behavior and their lack of interest in helping the other people: *"4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move*

*them with their finger.<sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,<sup>6</sup> and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues<sup>7</sup> and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”*

As the master of his disciples, Jesus used all opportunities to teach them, guide them and form their character. He was so concerned about the fact that the disciples must not follow the Pharisees’ model. Whatever the Pharisees were doing he wanted his disciples not to do and whatever the Pharisees were not doing he wanted his disciples to do. Were the Pharisees hypocrites, he warns them to avoid it ( *...he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. - Luke 12:1).*

Were they proud, he was asking his disciples to be humble. Were the Pharisees looking for honor before the people, he wanted his disciple to reject honor. Were they rejecting and despising the other people, Jesus wanted his disciples to love, help, forgive the other people.

To come back to our passage in chapter 17 of Luke’s gospel, I think Jesus is taking the time for a teaching moment with his disciples. He is going to teach them some important things and he is going to use strong images and strong words in order to impress on them the truths he wants them to learn.

He is more interested in forming their character than in making them feel good about themselves. In few months, with Jesus going back to heaven, the disciples would start life on their own, as his church, and He wanted the disciples to get it right in their relationships with each other. Jesus wanted them to see a portrait of his disciple, to impress on them few character traits of Christ’s disciple.

The first character trait is: Christ’s disciple does not offend others.

The English Standard Version translation uses the expression temptations to sin, but there are other translations using a stronger expression: ‘stumbling blocks’ (verse 1). Jesus is saying that stumbling blocks will come. It is not a matter of “if”, but rather “when”. It is *sure*, it *will* arrive, but woe to the one through whom it comes. The world or people who do not know Christ do this (*“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!-Matthew 18:7 ESV*). It is so important! It is so serious! Christ’s disciple does not offend his brothers and sisters, especially those who are young in their faith (“little ones”). Jesus is addressing the teachers of the Law, who were there with the Pharisees, with this warning: *“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”-(Luke 11:52 ESV)*. The teachers of the Law were stumbling blocks

for the people who wanted to get to God. The world, the Pharisees and the scribes may do this, but Christ's disciple does not offend "these little ones", the younger Christians.

A second character trait is: readiness to forgive. Christ's disciple always forgives others.

He is not only trying to avoid offending his brothers and sisters, but also he does not hold grudge against people who offend him. He forgives the people who sin against him, even if sometimes he needs to confront them. Again, this is very important! This is very serious! Jesus starts with a word of caution: "Beware!" Pay attention to yourselves! Danger! Sin is damaging to the relationships. It has to be purged out. The parallel text is the one from Mathew 18, verses 15 to 17. There it is mentioned for the first time the word "church". So we know that the relationships that Jesus refers to when he says 'your brother' is the church inner relationship. In the passage of Mathew 18 Jesus establishes a clear procedure on how to deal with sin in the church, especially when that sin has devastating effects for the community. Not every sin has to be confronted, but when it has consequences on other people in the church it should be dealt with it promptly.

In the light of Galatians 6:1-2, the dealing with sin has to be done in love and with gentleness and "*Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.*"

Without digressing too much, at the end of this process, "if he repents, you must forgive him" – says Jesus. Christ's disciple forgives. But, how often? The rabbi would teach people that three times would be the maximum number, but Jesus is telling the disciples seven times a day. Peter asked on another occasion, and Jesus answered 'seventy times seven', which basically means 'unlimited'. Christ's disciple offers unlimited forgiveness to those who sin against him or her.

Let us look back again: Jesus wants his disciples to never offend others and to always forgive them if they get offended. No wonder the disciples are discouraged. Who can do this? Who is adequate for this? Lord, help! "Increase our faith!" exclaimed them.

The third character trait of Christ's disciple is: humility in acknowledging his/her weakness.

In front of such difficult tasks, the disciples saw themselves weak. They cried out to Jesus: "Increase our faith!" Supplement it, add to it! Lord we need you. Our faith is small. Jesus does not deny their weakness or lack of faith. He agrees with them. In fact, He said: "*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed...*" Implicitly, he acknowledges their small faith. Five or six times he admonishes them for their little faith or for their lack of faith. "You are right. You need a stronger faith, but you need a type of faith that is growing, even if it starts small – like the mustard seed". Jesus took the example of the mustard seed to make his point. The mustard seed was probably the smallest seed the farmers used in Israel. The characteristic

of this seed is that it grows disproportionately. From such a small seed will come up a huge tree (4-5 meters in height and width). So Jesus' point is: "Yes, you are right. Your faith is small but it has to be a type of faith that starts to grow and grows and grows". "If you had this type of faith" – he says – "you could do extraordinary things, supernatural things.", "*you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.* In fact, to uproot a mulberry tree, to transplant it across the sky and to plant it in the sea is a supernatural thing.

In other words, Jesus is telling the disciples: "You think it is hard, it is supernatural to always avoid offending the others and always forgiving? You are right. It is like asking a mulberry tree to be uprooted and to be planted in the sea. It is supernatural, but if you put your trust in me, I will do it through you. With another occasion, when he was close to a mountain he told the disciples: *For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.*"(Mathew 17:20). Later he will tell the disciples: ("*What is impossible with man is possible with God.*"- Luke 18:27).

'So, Jesus says, you are not sure you can do all these things I told you to do, just trust me (have faith in me) and in my power'. The apostle Paul shares with us the answer that Jesus gave him at one of his questions: "my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). And Paul learned the lesson because he testifies in the next verse: "*For when I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2 Cor 12:10).

Jesus also promised the disciples during the last night before his crucifixion: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.*"(John 14:12,13). Why does Jesus require his disciples to be so careful in their relationships? Does it seem too difficult or unfair in asking them to never offend others and always forgive them when offended? NO. It's because that's how Jesus himself set the example – boundlessly showing grace and patience to his loved ones: boundlessly forgiving all enemies"?

If you put your trust in me, I will empower you to do all these things. But, the single purpose of all this is that the "Father may be glorified in the Son".

Jesus' point in the last part of our passage is that Christ's disciple rejects honor.

This is the last character trait of Christ's disciple: he is humble enough to reject honor for himself, and instead to deflect it towards the Lord.

As we mentioned at the beginning, the Pharisees loved to be honored. Jesus warns the disciples against the temptation of receiving honor (as the Pharisees) through this example of a bond servant /slave (verses 7-10).

The example that Jesus is using is very well-known. He is using rhetorical questions because all the answers are known. He makes his point: The slave/servant is not entitled to honor from the master just because the slave performed his duty. He did what is what was expected from him to do. Then Jesus concludes: *“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.’(Luke 1:10).*

When you begin to be useful to God beware not to become full of pride, thinking that God must be impressed with you. Do not assume that you have God in your debt. Everything is by grace: we are saved by grace, we live by grace and will be rewarded in heaven by grace. No matter what we have done, it is not enough for what God is worth. So our attitude should be: yes, we have done things or God has done extraordinary things through us, but we are nonetheless unworthy servants. All glory is directed towards God (the “Father may be glorified in the Son”).

The apostle Paul captures this aspect so well in his letter to the Romans:

*33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”35 “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).*

In conclusion, as he taught the disciples, Jesus is calling us to a life that is so different from the one the Pharisees were living then and which the world is living today. Christ’s disciple is expected to never offend the other, and to always forgive those who offend him. He is humble enough to acknowledge his weakness, but to trust in Jesus and to accomplish everything through his power. He is humble enough to reject honor and to deflect it towards God who deserves all glory and honor.

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.(Hebrews 13:20-21).*