

According to the Associated Press... on the evening of February 6, 1996... several teenagers drove the rural roads east of Tampa, Florida... with the intent of playing pranks. ... (Tragically) their game was anything but funny. They pulled some twenty street signs out of the ground... including the stop sign at one fateful intersection.

The next day... three of their buddies... who had just finished bowling... breezed through that intersection without stopping. ... Their car sailed into the path of an eight-ton truck... and they were all killed. ... One year later... the three perpetrators of the deadly prank were convicted of manslaughter. In June of 1997... they stood in orange jail jump-suits and handcuffs before a judge in a Tampa courtroom... weeping and wiping their eyes... and were sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

Why would I open a sermon from God's Word... describing such a horrible event? ... I do it for two reasons. #1. Because in the same way... Jesus gives a sensational description... that is perhaps even MORE horrific. ... #2. Because of the parallel between that awful incident... and the sobering impact that Christ wanted His listeners to feel... from His Own use of a shock tactic... (which opens our passage today.)

(Here is what I mean.) ... It is a dangerous thing (with tragic consequences) for anyone to take down a signpost on the highway. ... And it is no less dangerous ... (actually... I am about to build a case that it is even MORE dangerous)... for anyone to vandalize the signposts that God puts on the highway of life. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Luke 17:1-2

You might be so familiar with these two verses that it no longer has the kind of impact that Christ intended for His listeners to feel. But I assure you... He probably heard some gasps when He told this.

The punishment for contributing to the eternal downfall of another is nothing less than hopeless/eternal/spiritual destruction. ... Jesus graphically illustrated this punishment.

A millstone was a large... exceedingly heavy stone used to grind grain into flour. ... Jesus combined this with a terrifying (but traditional) image of chaos and evil... in ancient literature. In Jewish culture... the ocean was used to depict disorder and wickedness.

Furthermore... a common thought in Jesus' day... was that a body lost to the sea... could not be resurrected in the last day... So Jesus' listeners would be thinking in terms that this person (who has sunk to the sea bottom)... had absolutely no hope... Jesus was communicating to His listeners that those who cause the eternal downfall of other people - would themselves experience a pain-filled...hopeless... and eternal doom.

J. Vernon McGee (who I have not quoted for a long time) wrote:

What the Lord says here is very severe. I will be honest with you; I think I would rather be most any person than the one selling drugs to young people today. I believe that the punishment for one who sells drugs will be greater than for some others. It is serious business to cause someone, especially a youngster, to offend. There is one thing worse than going to hell; it is going to hell and having a son or daughter say to you, "Dad, I am here because I followed you." That is the worst thing that can happen to a person.

It would be better to die (even a horrible death) than to cause a little one to stumble and ultimately incur the woe of which Jesus warns. ... Better for a

church leader or pastor to die - than to teach errant doctrine. ... Better to die - than to have a lifestyle that trips others. ... Better to die - than to have attitudes that drive others away from Christ.

Here in the first two verses of Chapter 17... we see that Jesus warned: Temptations... traps... and troubles from failures are going to come. Then the Lord adds a serious statement: "*Woe to the person through whom they come!*" Great sorrow awaits the person that tempts others to sin and spiritually fail.

The word which we have translated as "temptations to sin" in verse 1 is the Greek word ***skandalon {skan'-dal-on}***. It means "the movable stick or trigger of a snare or trap; any impediment that is placed in a path to cause a person to stumble or fall down and to stay down for quite a while." ... It is a reference to a temptation that draws another person into error or sin. A believer may stay down for quite some time... and a person who is looking into Christianity may be turned away and damned to Hell forever.

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior... you have a bull's eye on your back... especially if you are living your life for Christ. You have a target on you and Satan and his forces are out to stop you for sure. Jesus says this is a fact of life for the Christian. ("*Temptations to sin are sure to come.*")

Then the Lord issues a grave warning to anyone that would be used of Satan to cause believers to be led astray from the Lord... especially "*little ones.*" ...This includes new believers... or unbelievers who are searching... or believers who have recently experienced trauma in their life. In short – "little ones" means "*anyone that is associated with Christ and is vulnerable by being in special need of instruction and compassion.*"

How does a person become a stumbling block and lead “little ones” astray?
There are three key channels.

1. False teaching:

This is an effective way that religious leaders steer vulnerable Christians and seekers in the wrong direction. Many cults (and ill-informed Church people) get hold of these susceptible ones. ... False doctrine is their primary stumbling block... but it is not limited to rank heresy. ... Sometimes it takes the form of eccentric teaching... legalism... and doctrinal imbalance — all of which tragically turn people away from simple faith in Jesus Christ. ... This is why it is so important to know the Bible so you will not be confused or led astray.

2. Faults in the Example of Christians:

Regular church attenders (who the vulnerable may look up to - thinking those church attenders exemplify proper Christian behavior)... can cause them to spiritually stumble... The vulnerable see them compromise. They witness in them: immorality... drunkenness... drugs... gambling... cursing... involvement in pornography... temper tantrums... selfishness... greed... griping... laziness... (and any number of other vices.) It turns these “little ones” OFF to church and the Lord... or it turns these “little ones” ON to this kind of lifestyle. (“*Oh! It must be OK...*”)

3. Refusing to (whole-heartedly) forgive another Christian:

This is the one on which Jesus will spend the bulk of our passage today. (And) He begins it... in the very next verse.

Luke 17:3

OK... I have to admit something to you. This verse had me scratching my head earlier this week. I was talking to the elders on Monday and I had them examine this verse with me for a moment. I shared with them that there was something that my understanding was missing. The first part of the verse says “Pay attention to yourselves”... and then it seems to say the exact opposite: “pay attention to others...”

Ummmm... If I follow the first part by paying attention to myself... I will not know if my brother sins... and I will not rebuke him. Observing that my brother is sinning and rebuking HIM – is not paying attention to myself – it is paying attention to HIM! ... Why did Jesus say it like this? Which part should we obey?

By the way... whenever you read Scripture (make it a point) to write down questions that come to your mind and meditate on them. Ask God to guide you to the answer. Don't ignore them. God loves it when we chew on His Word.

Well... here is what I eventually came up with: when a person feels that he or she must rebuke another Christian for a sin... it is wise for that person to check his or her attitudes and motivations – FIRST(!)... BEFORE going to that other person.

Galatians 6:1 (ESV)

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.

Now... all of sudden it makes sense. Pay attention to yourself – and rebuke your brother who sins. Jesus also said this same thing at a different time. Matthew recorded it.

Matthew 7:3-5 (ESV)

³ *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?* ⁴ *Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?* ⁵ *You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

We are to take a good look at ourselves to make sure there are no glaring faults of our own – or an attitude that isn't gentle. ... The rebuke is to be serious and frank - but **gentle**. ... There is no room for belittling... or taking a superior attitude. ... The mere possibility of **enjoying** the rebuking (rubbing our hands together and smacking our lips with gleeful anticipation) is another disqualification for the undertaking. (INDEED... pay attention to yourself!)

Most of us tend to go the other way (however) by choosing to say nothing. We live in comfortable... **blameworthy** silence. ... But Jesus gives his followers no option—*"If your brother sins - rebuke him."*

(Now please hear me on this...) ... Given the context that we read this in – our failure to rebuke a sinning brother... or our failure to do it in the **right manner**... (because we did **not** pay attention to ourselves)... is definitely a way to cause a brother (or sister) in Christ to stumble. ... We cause them to stumble by ignoring the sin and letting them continue with harmful behavior... or we cause them to stumble by causing resentment in them through our harshness. (*"Who do you think you are? I don't need this from you!"*)

... [**P A U S E**] ... Closely linked with the responsibility of not causing others to stumble... is the responsibility to give them **proper** help... when we notice they have unrepentant sin.

Luke 17:4

OK... Now we see (from verse 4 here)... that the sin we are to confront in a brother (or sister) is an offense that they have done against us. How did I get that...? Because (otherwise) the Lord's command: "*forgive him*" is not appropriate. We don't forgive sins that are committed against other people – or against God. We can only forgive offenses that are done against us.

So... here is another area that Christ is addressing... where we may be very prone to make another believer stumble. It can easily happen if we refuse to forgive them when they have offended us – even if they keep doing it... and then coming back and asking for our forgiveness again.

Really...? ... Yes...! ... Jesus places the burden of responsibility on the person forgiving... rather than on the person who is repenting. ... The benefit of the doubt goes (entirely) to the one being forgiven.

... [P A U S E] ...

This raises immense practical difficulties. What about hypocritical requests for forgiveness? ... What if the sins being repented of repeatedly hurt others?

Obviously there are some qualifications. Nevertheless... Jesus' teaching does identify (with sharp distinctives) what genuine forgiveness is all about."— For example... here we see: on whom the burden of responsibility lies. It is on the forgiver. (And) we also see the extent of forgiveness. ... (To me it might seem a little excessive) But Jesus is teaching us that it is **better** to be willing to forgive seven times a day – (even though you might suspect that the "brother" is not sincere) - than it

would be to refuse to forgive a truly repentant soul... and thus place a stumbling block in his/her way.

This is difficult stuff. We must rebuke sin... even though we do not want to; and we must forgive sin... even though we do not want to. ... But obedience in these matters is ideal... because to do so is to become more like God. ... He always stands against sin in perpetual rebuke... and yet He also delights to forgive repentant sinners. ... His forgiveness is limitless. Has not God forgiven each of us countless times? ... Here we have opportunity to be very Christlike.

Jesus laid challenging responsibilities upon His followers... and the apostles reeled under the impact of His demand. He was requiring them (and us)... to steer clear from causing others to stumble... and always to be ready to forgive. Wow! This sure requires strength from above! And the disciples recognized that *right away*. This explains what comes next in verse 5.

Luke 17:5

Mature Christians understand that forgiveness is not a cheap exchange of words (the way squabbling children often flippantly say “*I’m sorry*” to each other.) ... True forgiveness always involves letting go of our pain and the “right” to get even. We have been hurt and there is a price to pay in healing the wound.

We might have expected the disciples to ask Christ to increase their love. Why did they ask for greater faith? ... The answer is because love motivates us to forgive... but faith activates that forgiveness. ... No wonder the disciples asked for more faith! (But notice Christ’s response.)

Luke 17:6

Is Jesus rubbing salt in their wound...? “Jesus, give us more faith.” ...
“Well... Guys... if you **did** have (even) a little tiny little amount... you would be doing some amazing miracles!” ... How was Jesus’ reply helpful...? They ALREADY sensed their need for more! Why taunt them about their lack?

Well... that is not what Jesus is doing. ... They asked Jesus for greater faith... and Jesus is telling them – “*THAT is not the issue! ... You don’t need MORE faith... **Look what the tiniest amount can do!** ... You are seeking the wrong thing!*” ... Jesus is rebuking them.

The Lord bluntly told them that they did not need more faith. The smallest amount of faith could accomplish the miraculous. Faith is not measured by its bigness or littleness. What is needed is not so much a large faith as a living faith.

Seeds contain life. Jesus pointed to a mustard seed because it is so small AND because it contains life. “*You don’t need a large faith — you need a living (growing faith.) That kind of a faith is an infinite resource... suitable for any occasion!*”

Considering (now) the whole context of this conversation – the disciples thought it would be too difficult to forgive the way Jesus said that the must. So they asked Christ to increase their faith. The lesson that Jesus is teaching them (and us) is that if a person has this living faith (represented as a seed with life in it) then they will be able to follow these commands that Jesus just gave. They will be gentle... and persistently forgiving.

Living faith produces a calmness whenever we have been wronged. We enter a rest that keeps us from seeking revenge and readily extending forgiveness... instead.

(LISTEN!) If we are having trouble forgiving... we need to apply a seed of living faith that believes **God is in control**. God is not slumbering. We need to believe that God loves us. We need to believe that He will take care of us. We need to believe that He will ultimately bring TRUE justice – beyond anything our lack of forgiveness could ever accomplish.

... [P A U S E] ...

Given the immense requirements Jesus just gave His disciples (to not cause a little one to stumble... to rebuke those who sin... to extend unlimited forgiveness... and to exercise immense faith) — these disciples might have easily presumed - that in so doing... they sure would earn God's favor.

Maybe the thought has crossed your mind (whenever you have felt convicted to give the Lord greater obedience)... that if you **DID** – He would REALLY bless you in all sorts of wonderful ways. ... (You know) *“perhaps some of the struggles that are in my life right now exist because I haven't been as obedient as I should be. If I start doing the things that I've heard Him speaking to me about through these Scriptures today... I just know that He is going to reward me with less hardship. My financial troubles will be over! The trouble that I am having with a family member will get resolved. ... OK God... I am going to count on You to come through for me – because I intend on serving You better.”*

Jesus seems to anticipate this line of thinking. So... Jesus continued with some more important teaching... Jesus explodes such pondering with a mini-parable.

Luke 17:7

He introduced the story with a phrase that means: “*Can any of you imagine?*” ... Their answer had to be: “*No, we cannot imagine such a thing!*”

Luke 17:7-10

Jesus’ point is simple. This should be the kind of wholehearted devotion (the kind that does not expect extra reward) — that we give to the Lord. God is our superior; we are not His master. We serve Him... not the other way around. ... He already has brought us into His household as a gift of grace. Service is our duty... our responsibility... our privilege. ... Service to Him is its own reward. ... He may (and undoubtedly will) reward us with *far* more than any master ever gave a slave... but we have no right to expect anything from our Superior.

The Pharisees (on the other hand) taught an elaborate system of rewards and punishments in their relationship with God. In their self-serving concept of divine justice... God rewarded good behavior with material blessing and punished sin with poverty... disease... disfigurement... and calamities.

Therefore (by their reckoning) good deeds put God in the position of being debtor! Pharisees felt that God owed them. (That puts them above God.)

A servant must be more interested in his duty than what is due him. He must make service more important than salary. That is a difficult attitude to

have especially in our day of demanding unions... rights' emphasis... and self-esteem philosophies.

Today people perform so poorly that to just do your duty is considered exceptional conduct. Many are so poor at paying their bills that to pay your debts on time every time is considered most praiseworthy. That is not the attitude in Christ's service. Doing our duty is expected; it is not extra special conduct. When it is all said and done... the best we can say is that we are unworthy to be God's servants.

Jesus teaches us in today's passage that watching ourselves... rebuking... forgiving... exercising a living faith - is nothing *extraordinary* — this is the way we are supposed to live. ... And when we do it... we are (at best) "unworthy servants." Such a life is our duty. This life (extraordinary as it may be) is ordinary Christianity.

Oh... that we could be extraordinarily ordinary!

These lessons from our Lord today came as Jesus made His way to Jerusalem. He was preparing to leave them and He wanted to train them with regard to being extraordinarily ordinary. They would be ministering to others in His place. It was a critical time. Time was short.

This is a critical time for you and I as well. Our time is short. Jesus shares a variety of principles that pertain to our ministry with others and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. These principles deal with our attitudes... behavior... and our relationships with other people and God.

Oh... that we could be extraordinarily ordinary!