

The Christian Call of Duty

Luke 17:1-10 (NIV)

¹ Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³ So watch yourselves. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." ⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. ⁷ "Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

"Duty calls." Sometimes we use this phrase jokingly, sometimes seriously. It's a phrase that means you are simply fulfilling your responsibility. This is what is expected of you, what you are supposed to do. This is what you are capable of doing. So, do it. The phone rings the weekend you are on call, it's your duty to answer that call. Honey, I need you to help carry in the groceries and to take out the trash; duty calls. A fellow Christian who sinned against you repented to you; duty calls.

Wait. What? It's my duty to deal with a fellow Christian who has sinned against me? That's what Jesus is saying in our Gospel reading today. To forgive a brother or sister in Christ who has sinned against you and who comes to you and says, "I repent" is simply your Christian call of duty. But that's not the only thing that's part of our Christian call of duty.

Jesus points out that "things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come...So watch yourselves." (verses 1 & 3) Because we live in a sinful world, temptations to sin are going to come, but Jesus tells us that it's our duty to watch ourselves, guard ourselves so that we are not the ones through whom these temptations come. If you are willfully, purposefully being the person who brings these temptations, these stumbling blocks, "it would be better for [you] to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around [your] neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble." (verse 2) That means it is preferable that you sleep with the fishies, that you die, rather than be this person who brings stumbling blocks and temptations to people.

Another aspect of the Christian duty is "if your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them." (verse 3) When a fellow Christian sins against you, it is your God-given duty to point it out, to show them that this is wrong. This is not done to elevate yourself saying, "I at least know better not to do these things." No, this is done because sometimes people don't even know that they have sinned against you or hurt you. They will never know this if you do not rebuke them, point out their sin, in order to correct them.

This is what leads to the final part of the Christian duty of then forgiving your brother or sister in Christ when they repent to you for that sin, when they express their sorrow of what they have done, when they ask for forgiveness. What's more is you are not just doing this one time and that's all you get. Jesus says, "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." (verse 4) Seven times. That's a lot of sin against me in just one day. That's a lot of hurt. That's a lot of cost.

Forgiveness is costly. Think of it this way. Imagine that someone borrows your car, and he runs over your mailbox with it. Your insurance doesn't cover your mailbox. You've got a couple of options to fix the damage. You can demand that the other person pay for the mailbox. You can refuse to let the person pay anything and pay for it yourself. Or you can work out some kind of middle-of-the-road solution where you both pay half. No matter which option you pursue, someone has to pay the cost of the damage or it simply remains broken. When someone sins against you, they wrong you. They create a damage against you personally. You can demand that they repay you or you can release them from the debt they owe you – you can forgive them. Now realize that if you release them from what they owe you, someone still has to pay for it. Insurance won't do it. So, you end up paying for it or it will never be fixed.

When we forgive someone their sin against us, it's not a simple dissolution of the debt. Someone still needs to pay. When we forgive someone, we are saying to them that we are taking up the cost of the damage that they have done to us. We do not seek repayment. We do not hold a debt to them in their name. We pick up the cost.

Jesus' apostles realized this. This is why they immediately say to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (verse 5) The apostles look at this concept of forgiveness and say that there is no way that they can pay this price. They cannot do this; it's too much, too costly.

We often say the same. I'll forgive you the first time, but after that... The first one is free, right? But do it again...and again...and again, and I won't be forgiving. I'm going to withhold forgiveness from you because I don't think you are sorry enough for what you have done to me. In fact, I want a little repayment here. I want you to cover the damage you have done to me by your wrongs against me. Your spouse cheated on you. They come to you and ask you to forgive them, but this is not the first time. How can I forgive that person again? How can I forgive them seven times over? That person talked about me behind me back. They come to me and say that they are sorry, but this is a reoccurring pattern. How can I forgive that again and again? I can't do it. I need a stronger faith if this is what I'm supposed to do. "Lord, increase my faith so that I can forgive again and again, so that I can tell people that I will not hold the cost against them, but that I will bear it."

Jesus answer to the apostles' plea of "Increase our faith" was not to grant it. Instead, he replies, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." (verse 6) Faith in Christ as your Savior, as your God, is not a little thing. It's a powerful thing because of the object of that faith, who you trust in. Faith trusts God. God can do anything. If your faith, your trust, looks to you to give forgiveness for the fellow Christian who sinned against you and is asking for forgiveness for the seventh time, then, yes, you are not enough. You can't do it. You can't pay the cost, and you can't stop yourself from demanding payment from how they have wronged you.

The object of your faith must be God. God can do the impossible. God can pay the price that we cannot. God can release people from the debt they owe him. He created the heavens and the earth. He can uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea and have it thrive. He can do the impossible. In fact, he did the impossible by taking on human flesh, living for us, dying for us as our substitute. "[God] forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:14) God has released you and me from our debt of sin against him, the damage we did to him with our sins, and he turned around and paid the debt himself refusing to let us pay any of it back.

Because God canceled our debt against him and brought us to believe in him, gave us faith in him, you don't need a stronger faith to forgive your brother or sister in Christ when they sin against you and come back to you and say, "I repent." You don't even need a stronger faith if this happens to you seven times in one day by one person because you are not repaying the debt. You are not the one to hold this person to pay for damages rendered to you. God does that. That's our God, the object of our faith.

This is why Jesus says, "When you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (verse 10) You were made new in Christ when you were brought to faith in him as your Savior, as your God. As a Christian, it is simply your duty to watch yourself so that you do not bring temptation to people, so that you do rebuke a brother or sister in Christ who sins against you, so that you do forgive that brother or sister in Christ when they come back to you and say, "I repent." This is your duty. This is who you are. This is what you do as a Christian. This is your Christian call of duty.

We were told in our First Lesson from Habakkuk that the righteous will live by faith. God has made you righteous by paying your debt of sin owed to him. He gave you faith to believe this. You don't need more faith to forgive people because it's not up to you to forgive; it's up to God. He paid the debt of our sins and he refuses to let us pay for any of it. As a forgiven child of God, do your Christian duty. Watch yourself so that things that cause people to stumble do not come through you. Rebuke your fellow Christian when they sin against you. Forgive them when they come back to you and say, "I repent." You don't need a stronger faith to do this. God has built you to do this. So, when you forgive, forgive that person saying, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." (verse 10) Amen.