

My Brother's Keeper, Part 3

Luke 17:5-10

September 4, 2022

Open your Bibles to Luke 17 and today we are following up on a two-part series that we've called, My Brother's Keeper, which is the first. It's in the first ten verses Luke 17:1-10. After Jesus addressed the Pharisees at the end of the 16th chapter, we've seen that he has turned to his disciples and he speaks to them with concern. Because hell is real. Because hell is horrible. Because it's unforgiven sin that takes us there. Jesus is keen to warn his disciples.

He tells them that we don't ignore the sin we see. We don't ignore it in our own lives. We don't ignore it in our families. We don't ignore it in our church. We deal with the sin. We confront the sinner. We rebuke the sin. We remove the stumbling blocks from our midst. And we are always ready and eager,

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standing by, ready to forgive every penitent, humble, contrite, believer.

Jesus' instruction here is simple, isn't it? "If your brother sins rebuke him." You can't get shorter than that. I think, and say the same thing. It's very clear. It's a straightforward word and when we trust him. When we obey his instruction, though, we may find ourselves entangled in webs of complexity. Dealing with sin and sinners can be perplexing, intimidating, confusing.

But still, if we'll trust and obey, if we'll apply Jesus' instruction, that's what does the trick. He does everything in and through our obedience to him. His word is what exposes the one who is going to bring stumbling blocks into the church. His word exposes that. At the same time, his word is what sanctifies the humble, contrite, and penitent believer.

As we often like to say, the same sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay. We preach the word, and we let the effect of the word, with its nature, with its properties, do its work

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and expose and reveal every heart. As we come to verse 5 in Luke 17, we see the Apostles' request and we see that it reveals in them a heightened sense of concern. And we can understand that concern because who among us likes to confront and rebuke sin? If you raise your hand, we're going to have somebody talk to you after the service, because that's like a psychopath or some sociopath, that likes to stir up trouble. That's not what we want to do. We don't want to deal with sin all the time and, and yet, that's exactly what the Lord's commanding us to do.

The Apostles are insightful here. They see the future through the lens of this challenge that's been raised by Jesus' command. They see difficulty in dealing with sins. You see a challenge of their own limitations, their own failings, and so, they asked the Lord in Luke 17:5, "Increase our faith." Increase our faith and by that request, with that request, the Lord instructs them further.

He expands their understanding; he encourages their faith and gives them hope, in God's power. And that's exactly what he's gonna do for us this morning. He's gonna expand our

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understanding of how this all works. He's gonna encourage our faith and strengthen our believing. Encourage us to obedience, in order, that we might have all hope, and our only hope fixed in God and his power.

Let's check out the text again. We'll start in verse 1 and read all the way through verse 10. "And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 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.

"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.

"The Apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' And the Lord said, 'If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Will any," of you, "anyone of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he's come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at the table?' Will you 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? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we've only done what was our duty.'"

We won't go back to where this starts, where we're gonna pick up from last week. The Apostles request in verse 5. There are times in scripture, in the Gospels, where the Apostles say things that seem to be, at first glance, to be a little bit dull, right? They seem to reveal, a, a lack of spiritual perception on their part, or maybe betray a lack of faith or a weakness in faith, or reveal a heart of fear and doubt. This is not one of those times.

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This request, "Increase our faith", is right in the ballpark. This is, they're thinking properly, they're thinking righteously, they're thinking submissively, to what Jesus has just taught them, but they're reflecting on the difficulty of it. This is actually quite a perceptive request, because this is a matter of faith. It's a matter of believing the Lord and then doing what he says. But they can see, you might say the devil is in the details, on this whole confronting sin business.

They're obviously a bit apprehensive, as they think about how this might go down. Maybe, as they reflect back on past experiences and think about how it has gone down, been difficult. The Apostles, all of them, by the way, are men, after all. And it's been my observation about the male half of the human race that we're pretty keen to keep relational drama to an absolute minimum.

We don't like it, makes us uncomfortable, makes us use like, words and such, and language, and have to talk things through. I don't wanna stay. We wanna get out of that business. So, these guys see trouble ahead. Not only that, but we have to

remark that several of these men, a third of the Apostles at least, are professional fishermen.

What do fishermen do? They get away, right? Fishermen. What fisherman do you know who is eager to get into drama? Isn't the whole point of fishing to get away from drama, to escape the human race for a bit and just deal with fish in a lake. And by the way, the fish are hidden from their sites, so they don't have to deal with wiggly fish. Get some peace. Quiet. Escape conflict.

Proverbs 26:17 says, "Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears," and who wants to do that. That's what confronting sin looks like to them, and to many, it's just asking for trouble. But here are the Apostles. They don't refuse. They don't reject. They're pressed into service by the Lord's command. Notice, by the way, how Luke uses that title, Lord, twice, once in verse 5, once in verse 6.

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The Apostles here recognize Jesus' authority. They see him as Lord. They see this as a command. It's not optional. It's not a suggestion. They, also, were intuitive enough to see the threat of those who can cause stumbling. I mean, they've got a example, living, breathing right in front of them, in the Pharisees.

Jesus has just confronted them. Those who cause stumbling like Pharisees and scribes and those people who represent the organized leadership of Jewish religion. They could see how those people, because they have already come into their midst, they could see how in the future they'll infiltrate their number. They'll pollute their fellowship.

And these are men, after all. They're designed by God to protect the weaker, to protect the more vulnerable, in their midst. And, so, they get it. They embrace it. They accept it. But they're gonna need a little more ammo. That's what they see. They see the need for an increase of faith. So, the Apostle's request here is perceptive. They anticipate the challenges

involved in, in rebuking sin and, all at the same time, in forgiving repeat offenders.

They see the challenges in identifying friend and foe, in their midst, and Jesus' response to them basically is this, steady on boys, steady on. Your job is just to obey and keep on obeying. God will do all the work; you just keep at it. He will accomplish amazing things, in and through your simple faith and obedience. He'll accomplish seemingly impossible things in and through you, through your simple obedience and trusting my word.

Basically, this text, that's what he tells them. But let's see how this fleshes out just a little bit further. We're gonna cover the ground this morning by dividing the text, verses 5 through 10 into two points. Let me get into point one, verses 5 and 6. Point one is this: Remember the power of God. This is for you. This is what he's saying to them, summing it up, but I'm saying it to you. Remember the power of God, verses 5 and 6.

Remember the power of God. Don't focus on your own weakness, limitation. Don't focus on the challenges. Put your

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eyes and attention instead on the power of God. There are two reasons the Apostles said to the Lord, "increase our faith." Two reasons I can discern anyway, but both of them having to do with human liability and human limitation.

We're, we're a lot like this, aren't we, when we're called to obedience. When we're called to exercise faith in some spiritual endeavor. When we're called to build the church, and strengthen and serve the church. When we're called to equip the Saints together. When we're given special privileges and tasked with special duties, in the church. We take stock of our own resources. What we have available in the account. Whether it's time, or energy, or money, or whatever it is.

We take stock of our resources. What we have to get the job done. We have to get the work done. How often, when we do that accounting, do we neglect to factor in the power, infinite almighty, unstoppable power of omnipotent God? We confess great things about God. We learn things about God every single week. But how often when the mundane and normal challenges come up in our life, he's not in our mind.

The Apostles, they're also thinking, like we can tend to think. Not factoring in God, when think about practicing biblical confrontation. All they can see is, fraught with difficulty. So, when it comes to practicing biblical confrontation, the Apostles considered the challenge.

First of all, I could see a couple challenges here, but first of all, as one that's going to require them to keep two, what seems to them, two contradictory postures in balance. There's a hard posture and a soft posture. A hard and a soft way of thinking, that they have to keep in their minds.

On the one hand, Jesus is calling them to vigilance. To have the watchfulness of a soldier. To develop the hard skill of guarding the fellowship, of protecting the weak against potential predators entering into their fellowship. This is the protector mindset. Taking care of the weaker, the more vulnerable among us. This is about protection, and it's a hard skill.

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On the other hand, Jesus is also calling them to be abundantly, magnanimously forgiving. This is the softer posture, patience and gentleness, and long-suffering, and overlooking offenses. Forgive the one struggling to overcome sin.

Encouraging steps of that penitent sinner toward obedience, being patient always, gentle, tender, kind. Hard and soft skills, a hard and soft posture.

People are people, right? They tend toward one and or the other. Generally speaking, we don't want soft people going to fight our wars overseas. We want them to develop their hard skills and keep on developing them. Sharpening them to a sharp, sharp point, to be the pointy end of the spear; going out and dealing with our enemies.

But you don't want that guy, giving you council about your sin. Coming back from the battlefield and saying, just suck it up and deal with it. What are you, weak, soft? Yeah, they are weak and soft. You need a tender hand there. Both are skills, hard and soft, skills of a shepherd. Shepherd setting, a, an

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example, The Good Shepherd, setting an example, for all of us as a sheep.

Disciples, ex, see this. Hard, soft skills required. Hard and soft posture required. No one has both of these. No one can keep these two postures, these two skills, which always seem to be in tension with one another, in a proper balance. It must, this is how it must have seemed, to be to them, and it seemed to be way beyond them. How am I going to bring this together?

If this does express the Apostles concern, I can see how it does. They would need to learn, by observing from their Lord, that these two postures, being hard against sin, being willing to be direct, and confronting proud sinners, but, also, at the same time, soft toward the penitent. Gentle toward the struggling believer.

These two postures are not, at all, in tension with one another. There's no need for balance. As if, these two approaches are in tension. As if, they're competing with one another. They could see by observing their Lord, that these two

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skills, these two postures, are in complete and true harmony. Why is that? Because this is the heart of love.

This is the heart of love, exemplified in the Lord Jesus Christ; in his words, and his ministry, and his dealing with people, all kinds of people. The love of God incarnate, in Jesus Christ, was being modeled before them constantly, consistently, always in perfect wisdom, in the life and ministry of the Lord.

Christ was strong, and rigid, and totally inflexible, when he was dealing with sin and proud sinners. But at the same time, he is also soft and gentle in dealing with the humble. He's dealing with penitent sinners, who are coming to him, drawn by his teaching, drawn by his offers of the Gospel and he's so kind. So, kind in dealing with those who seek forgiveness, who seek his help.

So, what may seem to be contradictory postures, the hard and the soft, they are not in tension. They don't need balance. What is required is love, as the Lord has loved. What's required is love. Love for God and love for others. Love for holiness is

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a love for God and a love for others, and it means a consistent attitude towards sin. A posture that's always ready to purge sin. That is love.

The result of that love is in an unrepenter, unrepentant sinner often leaves the church. The result on the other side though, is a repenting Christian, who gets rid of his sin. Who grows in holiness. Who grows in joy. Who grows in gratitude. Who grows in all the graces and the virtues of the Holy Spirit, called the fruit of the spirit.

That's the work, to show love. That's love right there, doing the hard yards. And that's what the Apostles were witnessing constantly in Jesus Christ, and that is what they themselves learn to practice in their own ministries. If you want an example of that, read the letter of First John, you'll see this hard and soft posture.

A second challenge, I think, that the Apostles perceived, in practicing biblical confrontation, was just the sheer complexity of it. Just the difficulty that comes when you start

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to get into the weeds with somebody about their sin. Just, the, the thought of them being drawn into perplexing problems and becoming entangled in a web of what's really mysteries, you know, unclear motives, historical, relational conflicts, bitterness, resentment, a whole history of offenses. And by the way, sinners can be tricky. They don't always tell you everything they're thinking.

The issues of sin are not always obvious. Solutions are not always immediately apparent. Confronting sin can involve motives and intentions of the heart. Things that are hidden from our eyes. Things that only God knows. So, it is understandable, I think, just on a natural human level, why Jesus' command to rebuke the sins we see, to confront what we know, in that, we can be tempted to turn tail and run away. This is especially true, when we try it and we get some blowback from some proud, arrogant, unrepentant person. It seems like we've opened a proverbial can of worms and stuff is crawling around, all over the place and it's like, man, I kind of, if I just never got into that.

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So, what's common to both these concerns? What's the common denominator? What ties them together, at the root of these apprehensions of the Apostles, whether it's for the Apostles or whether it's for us. At the root of it, is viewing this through the lens of human limitation, rather than divine power. We flip that around, make sure we're always factoring in the power of God, into the equation.

That's the key: When we consider, always, his will for our behavior, his role in the outcome, his role in bringing the situation into our lives, and before us, in the first place. Is our God not sovereign? Is he not a father, always disciplining and training his children? Is he not training us and strengthening us, for the purpose of holiness? And does he not order our days and order our steps?

Does he not put difficulty before us, in order to train us, of course. You need to remember that, whenever we're tempted to turn tail and run. This is faith. This is when we exercise faith. What are we doing? We're looking not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, 2 Corinthians 4:18.

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But the things that are seen are transient, temporal, passing away. Of the things that are unseen are eternal, they're fixed, they're permanent, you can rely on them.

So, you might jot this down as a pro tip for living the Christian life: Whenever obedience to God's word seems hard, when obeying Christ seems to be impossible, we're putting way too much focus on our own limitations. Aren't we? Way too much focus. Does our weakness, or our immaturity, or even our sins, does any of that hinder God?

Does our lack of skill ultimately really matter? Does the complexity of any given problem stymie God? Baffle him? Cause him to ring his hands with anxiety and worry? When we obey God, when we follow his word, when we obey Christ, when we do what our Lord says here, we have enlisted the almighty power of God. Nothing stops him. Which is what the Lord alludes to there in verse 6. Notice that there, the Apostle said, "Increase our faith." And the Lord answered and 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."

Well, this simple answer, this illustration, it's packed with meaning. But it really does answer the questions about obedience, that these Apostles have not yet asked. This is instruction about faith, and an instruction, that really fills in the gaps of what they don't fully understand. But their question is what opened the opportunity for us to hear this from our Lord. So, I praise God for it.

Two key ideas here, in the Lord's answer to them, in verse 6. First, we can see very clearly. We can all see this doesn't take a degree. Faith is not a matter of size. It's not a matter of size. If the faith is there, it's not our matter of size. It's a matter of, what? Exercising it, putting it into practice. Faith isn't a matter of size. You either have it or you don't.

So, if it's there, it's a matter of putting it into practice. It's a matter of exercising faith. It's about using the faith that you have. Jesus makes this inescapably plain by just using a common mustard seed, as an illustration, which was proverbial in their day. It's kind of idiomatic, a saying among

them, a mustard seed is proverbial, for its tiny size. The mustard seed itself looks like a kind of a grain of sand or a speck of dust in the palm of your hand. Hardly visible, easily missed, but when that seed is planted, in soil and it's watered, nurtured, the life that's inherent in the seed grows into a plant, that is disproportionately larger than the seed it came from.

Can say that with any seed, right? It's not the size of a seed that matters. It's the presence or absence of the seed, because there is life in the seed. In the right conditions and in the right soil, that seed will do its job. But a mustard seed, among the disciples, among the Apostles, and the people of that land, made the point emphatic. It's among the smallest of seeds, and the tree that grows from it is quite large. You can look it up on the internet and see this large bushy tree that grows out, but the point's clear. It's not about the size of faith. Growth, strength, fruitfulness, these will come, if faith is there, because God's power comes through faith.

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Faith is the most primary, the most fundamental of all the graces that God gives us. It's the initial grace that we receive which directs us away from the world, away from our sin, and toward God, toward Christ, toward his righteousness. We return from our sin, repentance. We turn toward God in faith. It's the very first, very first, most primary, fundamental of all the graces. Some call it a self-emptying grace. Self-emptying grace. Why is that? Because faith is, truly, faith is like an empty pipe. It's like a, like a water main. The pipe is only effective when it's connected to the right source and when it's cleared out of all obstruction.

So, the water main does its job when it's empty of all, but the life-giving water, that it's connected to. That's faith. In the same way, when our faith is in God, when it's connected to the right person, an eternal person with eternal resource. When our faith is in God and when it's free of all obstruction, get all the stuff out of the pipes, all distraction, all sin. The life-giving power of God is at work in our lives to make us strong, and mature, and fruitful. So that's the first point. It's not about size, it's about if you have it or not, and then if you have it, exercise it.

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The second observation, here, about what Jesus says is that faith is not about doing miracles. Faith is not about doing miracles. It's about knowing and doing God's will, which unleashes divine power. Faith is not about doing miracles, but knowing and doing God's will to unleash God's power.

Look again in verse 6. "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." And you say, Sure sounds like he's promising them miracles. I don't know what that is, but it looks miraculous to me. I don't know what that is, but that looks supernatural. Nothing natural about that. I know, I know. And I thought about that before writing down, faith is not about doing miracles, so trust me; in just a minute here, you'll see it.

There are on two separate occasions earlier in Jesus' ministry, where he used similar language as this about faith. You see, in Matthew 17:20, the, the, Apostles failed to exercise or cast out a demon and Jesus explained the problem. He said,

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"If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you'll say to this mountain." And what's the mountain a picture of? An entrenched demon that won't get out. It's not going to move. "You'll say to this mountain, move from here to there. It'll move and nothing will be impossible for you." So, with faith, cast out demons.

Later in the ministry in Matthew 21:20, the Apostles marveled when Jesus cursed a fig tree on one day they came back and the thing was completely shriveled up. They marveled and he said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and don't doubt, you'll not only do what's been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain be taken up and thrown into the sea, it'll happen." Very similar language, isn't it?

But in this case, on this occasion, Jesus replaces the mountain with this Mulberry tree. He replaces the imagery, this immovable nature of the mountain, he gives it the nature, wants to talk about the nature of a Mulberry tree. Why is that? Because here Jesus is using this tree, the Mulberry tree, as an illustration.

The word translated, Mulberry tree, it's the word *sykaminos*. *Sykaminos*, the New English Translation identifies this more specifically, as the Black Mulberry tree. It's the, *Morus Nigra*, native to Palestine. The King James version translates the word just, just, transliterates it, calling it the Sycamine tree, Sycamine. It's distinguished from the tree that comes later, in Luke 19:4, that Zacchaeus climbed to see Jesus, which is called a Sycamore tree. It's a different tree, that is *sykomorea*. This is *sykaminos*, two different trees.

So, the Sycamore Fig, the *Ficus Sycomorus*, often called the Fig Mulberry, that's the one that Zacchaeus climbed. And it produces a sweet fig like fruit. It provides great shade. It's got low hanging, you know, low developed branches that they could, you know, Zacchaeus climbed up on, scurried right up, very strong, wide, spreading lateral branches from which he could see a passing crowd of people.

But this tree here, this *sykaminos*, the Sycamine tree. Black Mulberry tree, different nature, different characters.

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Looks the same a little bit on the outside, but it had a vast and tenacious root system. It gave the tree great longevity, long, long life, 500-600 year lifespan for this tree.

Due to its extensive and intricate, really eradicable, root system, the Mishna prohibited planting a Sycamine tree within 75 feet of a cistern. Why? Because the roots are gonna penetrate that cistern wall, the cistern walls, and destroy the water tight integrity of a cistern. So, it's root system was known and warned against.

Jesus points to *this* Mulberry tree. Think the near demonstrative pronoun this versus that. He's talking about this one. He's pointing to one right in their midst. If you have faith, you can say to *this* Mulberry tree, which is probably been around 500-600 years, root systems that are going all underneath us and all around us, you can say to this one, be uprooted. In and of itself impossible task.

At my house, I don't know about yours, but at my house, Cottonwood roots shoot out everywhere and little Cottonwood

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saplings are growing up in the middle of my lawn. Impossible to eradicate. Totally annoying. Because no matter how much you mow them down or pull them up, we've done both, they resist your will, they defy you. They exhaust your efforts. They continue to grow, reproduce, and drive you absolutely bonkers. Is this your experience? It's mine.

This Mulberry tree is like that. Vast invasive root system. Tree that's been growing its root system, like this for several centuries and to command this noxious thing to be uprooted, be quite the feat. Imagine, though, the satisfaction of taking the next step. If you're able to uproot that Cottonwood and then plant it in the heart of the sea. That's what I'd like to do with all those Cottonwoods. I'm picturing that right now, a few Cottonwoods, I'd like to uproot, plant in the heart of the sea, and drown them.

The Lord is interesting here. The, the, Lord is not simply talking about tearing out a pest of a tree, ripping it out by the roots. He's not talking about destruction. No notice, he ups

the ante, in picturing not just uprooting, but replanting. I, I'm not a gardener. I kill everything that's green.

But there are those who do this kind of thing, who realize that if you're going to uproot for the purpose of replanting, you need to protect the root system, don't you? Uprooted this tree with this massive, extensive, integrally woven, eradicable root system. Protect it all and then replant this entire thing, roots and all, in the sea.

And by the sea, he doesn't mean the Sea of Galilee. He's not talking about the Dead Sea. Both of which are large inland lakes, essentially. Luke is actually referring, he actually does refer to the Sea of Galilee, with a different word in his writing. *Limne* is the word for lake. Here it's the word *thalassa*. He wants us to picture a sea with ocean like proportions, like the Mediterranean Sea, like the Red Sea, more like oceans. Great depth.

So, if uprooting a Mulberry tree is humanly impossible, and it is. Doing so with the intent of keeping its root system

intact and undamaged in order to replant it, also impossible. But to take this Mulberry tree down to depth and replant the tree at the bottom of the sea. The illustration just moves into the realm from the impossible to the ridiculous. Which is intentional.

Jesus does not use the mulberry tree to encourage his Apostles to do miracles. You say, isn't that what you just described though? Miraculous, something that cannot be accomplished apart from supernatural power? Well, yes, I have described that. And no, that's not what this is about.

What Jesus has described here, I believe, is intended to illustrate exactly the kind of concern that the Apostles were recognizing in obeying Jesus' command to rebuke sin, to uproot sin, and cast it out of their midst, and then to forgive a repeated offender. He's acknowledging here their concern. Because the Apostles, they're right to see these relational issues, issues of sin and offense, issues of bitterness and resentment, hurt, sorrow, historical offenses. They are very perceptive to see, humanly speaking, these issues are

exceedingly difficult. They seem totally eradicable, totally irresolvable.

It's interesting to discover, by the way, that according to some sources, the fruit of the Sycamine tree can be, in contrast to, the sycamore with sweet figs, this fruit can be quite bitter. Which kind of strengthens the force of this kind of a tree, as an illustration about sin.

Some, sis, situations are so complex, some offenses so historic, going back many, many years, it's this entangled web of sin and hurt, intertwining, intricately woven roots of bitterness, all wrapped around the heart. On a human level, it's just totally impossible to uproot the bitterness, the anger, the resentment, the hatred. It kind of would be easier to extricate the Mulberry tree and uproot and plant it in the middle of the sea. Frankly, in some cases that would be easier and more desirable, then dealing with the human sin.

But Jesus is clear to say, by simple obedience to what he's commanded, here in this text, verses 3 and 4. Also in texts

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like Matthew 18, 15 to 20, which we covered last time. Other texts, as well, that contribute to the idea of rebuking sin, confronting it, dealing with the sin in the body, dealing with sin with people.

I've watched this time, and time, and time again as God unscrews the inscrutable. Where there was once only darkness, he brings light. Where there was once only resentment, bitterness, seething, and even murderous anger, he dissipates that sinful anger and grants forgiveness, that sets people free. Totally changes their demeanor.

Where once there was nothing but hatred, and it all reinforced by years, and years, and decades, centuries of offenses, he causes love to cut through it all and banish the hatred, and prevail and show his glory and his power and his grace. That's what forgiveness is. It sets the captive free.

Only when we forgive one another, which we can't do, by, apart from God's forgiving us first. But forgiveness has this very power to eradicate every bitter root. Moses commanded

something similar back in Deuteronomy 29:18. He said, "Beware, lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations.

"Beware lest there be among you a root bearing, poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.'" I shall be safe. I'm good with God. I've got a relationship with him on my own terms. Don't get into my business. "This will lead," away to the, "lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike," Moses warns.

The writer to the Hebrews is probably alluding to the same image, alluding to the same text. He writes this in Hebrews 12:15. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." What's going to accomplish this? How do we "beware lest there be among you a root bearing, poisonous, and bitter fruit." How do we see to it that, "no one fails to

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obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up; causes trouble; by many become defiled."

Look back at verses 3 and 4. "Pay attention to yourselves." Very simple. Be on guard, be watchful. Pay attention. "If your brother sins, rebuke him." Simple. "If he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you," like this turns personal, "and repeated seven times in the day, turns to you seven times saying, 'I repent', you must forgive him."

Forgiveness is powerful. So, if this seems hard. If it seems extremely difficult, beyond your own ability, even an impossibility, you don't need more faith to be obedient. Jesus says, you just need to exercise the faith that you have. You just need to remember the power of God. Do what the Lord commands. You'll look back and see that God has done through you what you thought was absolutely impossible. What could not happen.

In fact, on that looking backward note, one more point here in verse 6, the Lord said, in verse 6, and I'm going to

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translate this kind of more literally for you, giving you a sense that he gave it in the original. He says, "If you have," present tense, so have, this is "have faith, is, as small as a mustard seed," so it's possessing faith.

It's a present tense, so it's present, ongoing reality for every true believer. If you have, if you are having faith, if you possess faith, then here's how it sounds, "If you have faith, you were saying to this Mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it obeyed you." He uses an imperfect tense, "you were saying," and then he uses a, aorist tense to show the completion of it. You were saying this sometime in the past to the Mulberry tree, be uprooted, be planted, in the sea. And final action, it obeyed you, it's done.

One commentator puts it this way, "Jesus is portraying the obedience as preceding the command." The tree is ready to obey before the command was given. Faith is certain to accomplish its goal. What's the point? Jesus using past tense language, just talk about something that's a done deal. He wants us to know that when we act in faith, we can consider the deed as good as

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done. Even if we can't picture the exact outcome. Even if we can't anticipate or predict what's going to happen or how it's going to exactly pan out.

He wants us to know that when we act in faith, consider it done. God is doing his work. The outcome of our faith. The outcome of believing and doing what the Lord says. We see it most clearly in hindsight, don't we? It's not by looking ahead to an outcome. It's not by trying to predict exactly how it's going to pan out. It's not, look, about looking for results in real time. In the moment. Predicting and demanding and expecting, this is how it's going to happen.

Faith looks back to God's word and obeys it. Faith looks back to the testimony of Scripture and believes it. It finds hope in what's written. And faith looks back to see what God has accomplished in our own lives, when we trust and obey. That's the word, trust and obey.

Well, this brings us to a final illustration that Jesus uses here in verses 7 to 10, so we'll call this a second point.

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First point was, remember the power of God. And here's the second point, remember the duty of servants. Remember the duty of servants. Remember your duty as a servant, and by the way, the word is *doulos*, so it's slave. Remember your duty as slaves.

When we remember our duty to serve the Lord through obedience to his word, this is how he accomplishes remarkable works of power through simple faith, simple obedience. In this illustration, from verses 7 to 10, Jesus is using imagery that's familiar to the people of the ancient Near East. It's the relationship of servants to masters.

Actually, the word, as I said, is *doulos*, so it's a master slave relationship. And when he comes to verse 7, he portrays for the crowd, for the Apostles themselves, the disciples who were listening, the entire crowd, he portrays to them what's ridiculous and then in verse 7, what's normal. So first the ridiculous to them. "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he's come in from the field, come at once and recline at the table." No, no one listening would think that's reasonable.

Everyone listening would think that's ridiculous and Jesus is quick to rectify the scenario in the next breath. "Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me dress properly, serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink.'" And the whole crowd goes, yeah, that's more like it. That's exactly how it would go.

We tend to think of servant, master, slave, master relationships through the prism of American chattel slavery. The crime of kidnapping people from other places or participating in a kidnapping enterprise, criminal enterprise, buying those people as slaves, off the mark, off the market and then using them and grinding them down and destroying their lives. That's how we tend to think of it, because of the continued sense of consciousness we have about the sin of American slavery.

But that is not the slavery that's being described here. Jesus is not portraying some wealthy millionaire billionaire landowner who sits around and eats grapes all day. This is typical Middle Eastern household described here. Typical

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household, normal way of living in the ancient Near East. Just an ordinary home of modest means, they would own a slave or two, employ a servant or two, to help with normal chores around the, the, house or the farm or whatever it is.

You may remember the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Their father had a fishing business that they were due to inherit; they worked for. They had hired servants with them in the fishing vessel, Mark 1:20. So, he's, Jesus just describing things the way they are. The Apostles to whom he's speaking, for the wider group of disciples, for the ordinary folks in the crowd, this is just normal, everyday life.

An ordinary man owned a slave or two or he employed a hired servant. Not so he could, get back, kick back and relax. Take it easy. He did so to increase his productivity. He's out there with them on the farm as well. He's out there in the field. He's, he's out there tending the sheep, just like they are. He's out there shearing the sheep. He's out there doing the hard work. He does his own chores, as they do their own chores.

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This guy might not even be a landowner. He might be renting the land he's farming. He might be renting the land on which his sheep are grazing. By the way, think about this, farming, shepherding, serving meals, all these are metaphors for ministry. What does the farmer do? Plows up the fallow ground. He plants seed. When you see his little things come up, he starts to water and provide nutrients, and at the right time he harvests.

Shepherding: That's a very clear, by the way, farming is a very clear metaphor for ministry. Same thing with shepherding. Shepherds are to protect the flock. Guard the flock. Lead the flock. Guide the flock. Feed the flock. Nourish the flock. Take care of all their wounds. Keep them out of trouble. Shepherding is amazing metaphor for the ministry.

Serving meals, also used here, eating and drinking, another metaphor for ministry. In fact, that's exactly what I am or aim to be, is a good waiter. I just want to bring a good meal to you and not screw it up on the way. Just serve you the food. Let you eat from what Jesus has taught us. I'm just a waiter.

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I'm just a server. I'm a servant. Farming, shepherding, serving meals, all these are metaphors for ministry.

In any case, when the work day is over, as Jesus is picturing here, a slave is also the cook. He's also the server. So, he moves from outside chores to inside chores. Masters and slaves are not returning to the house, as the sun is setting, when it's dark. That's not the picture here. This is the late afternoon meal. This is probably around 3:00 PM. Sun's burning hot, blazing hot. It's a great time to be indoors.

It's Kenneth Bailey who says, quote, "We're not dealing with harsh hours imposed by an unfeeling master, but rather the normal expectations of a relatively short day's chores." That's the picture here. So, it's totally normal for the master to say, without thinking twice about it, prepare supper for me dress properly. Serve me while I eat and drink. After your work, you'll eat and drink.

In fact, it's so common he wouldn't even have to say that. Jesus is just drawing this to the attention of the Apostles. But

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now in verse 9. Jesus draws us to his point with this question. Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? Does he thank him? I mean, we think, you know, all politeness a thank you is appropriate. Hey, thanks for the hard work out there in the field.

But that's not what this is talking about. Our English translations all say it this, does he thank them. But the word here is actually the word *charis*. The word means grace, favor, benefit. So just to unpack this a bit more and get underneath, the, the text, here, the language.

The sense of the expression is, after the servant comes in doing his work outside, and now he comes in to do inside work. The sense of the expression is the master doesn't owe favor to the servant, does he? Because he did what was commanded. Is there any credit due to the servant just because he's done his job? Is the master somehow indebted to him just because he did what was expected?

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I don't know if you're finding this, but I am, as I go into restaurants and coffee shops, even some retail stores. I don't know if you see this, but you give your order to the person at the counter. It's the person who's been hired by the employer to stand at the counter and take your order and then fulfill your order. They get an hourly wage to do this.

And then after you give your order, you wait patiently. You receive what's ordered. Obviously, before you walk away with items in a bag, you need to square up accounts. You need to pay for your order. So put your credit card in the little reader to process your payment. After this little spinning thing, on the, on the screen, what happens next?

The counter individual says to you, as if this is totally normal, as if this is always the way it was, spins the little reader around to you and says, "Just need you to fill out the rest of the screen for me." What's on the little screen? Suggested tip amounts. It's basically, what Jesus is picturing here, a tip for doing your job.

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The servant who does his job, who's connected to the master, who benefits from food, and home, and shelter, protection, safety. His family, often of these slaves, are totally taken care of for life, generations. The families blend together and join together with, with, love and concern and protection. It's not the American shadow slavery picture. Don't picture that!

Picture what the Old Testament describes, in controlling the institution. There's a love and a kindness. Think, master and slave; us to God. He's, our master. How does he treat us? We're his slave. How are we treated? Do we lack for anything? The servant who does his job, he's owed no special reward. His master is not somehow indebted to him, because he did his job and didn't get a tip.

And this brings us to verse 10, so you also, when you've done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants. We've only done what was our duty." You'll notice in verse 9 and verse 10, how Jesus repeats some of the terms. Verse 9, "The servant did what was commanded." Verse 10, you've, "when

you've done all you were commanded." And again, at the end of verse 10, "We've only done what was our duty."

The word, *duty*, is the word, the verb *opheilo*, which, that which one should do. What one ought to do. That is to say, what's commanded. In each case, a verb of, doing, is tied to what's been commanded. So, there's a command, there's a hearing the command, and there's a doing of the command. Doing what the master says, that does not merit some special commendation. That's just what's expected.

In the servant's response, in verse 10, "We're unworthy slaves, unworthy servants." I'm gonna spare you the details of all the lexical issues there in verse 10, but some translations have them saying, and then you can tell there's a struggle here on how to translate this word. It's the word, *acheiros*, but it's we're unworthy slaves, we're unprofitable, or this one, good for nothing slaves. It's not true. It's not true. If they've done all they were commanded, there's some profit that's been gained for the master.

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I mean the master's, not just telling them to go and take this pile of rocks and move it over there, make small rocks out of bigger rocks, and then move the pile again. He's not just, he didn't have them to do worthless stuff. He has them to make a profit. So, they're not worthless, they're not unprofitable, they're not good for nothing.

There's an even worse translation that says, we're miserable slaves, which totally distorts, the a, the sense. It's the Syriac and Arabic versions, which get a little closer to the Middle Eastern culture and the idioms, and they get this one right when they translate this expression, "We claim no special merit." That's what they're saying, we claim no special merit. We're just doing our job. We're servants to whom nothing is owing. We're servants with no need. That's literally the translation of, *acheiros*. *Cheiros* meaning, need, and 'a' being an alpha privative that negativizes it, no need. We have no need. We're good.

Back to Jesus. What's he saying to his Apostles in particular? What do we learn as the larger group of disciples

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listening in? He pictures the Apostles here just doing their duty, just doing their job, doing what he's commanded, rebuking the sin, forgiving the sinner, and if anyone were to call it to their attention, they would respond by saying, what we're just servants to whom nothing is owing. We've just done our duty.

That's how the Christian life is lived, isn't it, trust and obey. We simply do what Jesus commanded, which is our normal duty, as slaves, of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in one sense this is mundane stuff. It's unremarkable. It's routine obedience. The duty of a slave to render obedience to his master. That's just the definition of the relationship.

And yet through simple, rather routine obedience to Christ, you know what God does through us, by his Spirit, because of his word; he does what appears to be utterly and totally impossible. That's Luke 17:1 to 10. God does the remarkable, through our unremarkable, but consistent obedience to his word.

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After addressing the Pharisees in chapter 16, verses 14 to 31. Jesus turned back to his disciples. He'd been teaching them before the Pharisees interrupted him, and he was teaching them, in Luke 16:1 to 13. Pharisees interrupted and he had to turn his attention to them. He did. Taught them.

He comes back in chapter 17 verses 1 and 2, and assures his disciples that divine justice is coming upon stumbling blocks. But that shouldn't be a cause for your rejoicing and becoming arrogant, but rather fear should put them on guard, to identify friend from foe, in their midst. Should teach them to root out any cause for stumbling, in verses 3 and 4.

Disciples, the Apostle's response reveals their concern about doing what Jesus has commanded them to do. "Increase our faith," verse 5. They've got to avoid causing a little one to stumble. Avoid those people coming in. They gotta deal with that. And they gotta keep forgiving an offending brother. Someone who repeatedly offends them, offends them personally.

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One has to be, at the same time, hard in guarding against false teachers and bad influences, and very soft, so soft in being receptive and being forgiving to repeated offenses. And though that seems hard and difficult, at the end of the day, when they look back on their life, they'll just see it as routine, mundane, normal stuff.

This is the Christian life. And yet God has done the amazing. He's built that church. He's saved those people souls. He's caused this family to reconcile and come together. He's strengthened the weak. He's helped the faint hearted. He's built-up people in love. He's used forgiveness to cut the cords of bitterness and anger and hatred and totally wipes it away.

He does in a church what is amazing, bringing Jew and Gentile together, male and female, slave and free, brings them all together, as one people. Manifesting his power in his glory to unite, to teach these people to love one another, that becomes the badge of their very existence. God does the amazing. All of that, believe me, is more remarkable than taking a Mulberry tree and planting it in the ocean.

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When we exercise simple faith. Through simple obedience. Just do what Jesus commands, treating him as our true master and we his servants, his slaves. God does what's absolutely remarkable, seemingly miraculous. Doing this, we do the duty of servants to trust and obey. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for your wisdom in how you have organized all of life, and use how Jesus himself taps into all the ways that life and the world is ordered. In order to make use of just common everyday things to, for the purpose of illustration, for the purpose of instruction. He is the master teacher. We're just trying to catch up to him every time we open the Bible. I'm just trying to discern his wisdom and his, the glory of his words.

And, Father, you've helped us through this passage, to, to learn these truths. As the Apostles saw, we see some difficulty and complexity and yet teach us never to focus on our limitations. Help us never to look through the lens of what

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can't be done, but instead look to you and your power, your will, the unstoppable nature of your grace.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Who for the joy was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame and you didn't leave him in the grave. He's now sitting at the right hand of you, Father. So let us consider what has been done through him. What's been accomplished through him. Let us just follow in his love, in simple trust and obedience. We pray this in Jesus' name and for your glory, father. Amen.