

Getting Along—Forgiveness, Faith and Service • Luke 17:1-10

One of the most memorable sights of late twentieth century news was the videotape of the beating of Rodney King by California police. Charges and counter-charges, trials, acquittals and retrials of police officers followed that incident. It was a memorable TV moment when King looked into the camera lens and asked, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

Getting along is one of the most basic and yet one of the most difficult challenges of our lives. Israelis and Arabs, Albanians and Serbs, blacks and whites, men and women, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, parents and children, Catholics and Protestants, management and labor—why can’t we all just get along?

This “getting along” business isn’t so simple, but Jesus offers some practical advice on how to do it. It may not always work. We may do what Jesus says and the other person may do the opposite. But, it’s a good idea to listen and follow Jesus’ advice—because that’s the right thing to do. Jesus’ list of some of the things Christians should do to get along with others is written in Luke 17 of Jesus’ biography. Number 1 on Jesus’ list in Luke 17 is something not to do: “Don’t cause another to sin.” In Luke 17:1-3 Jesus said to his disciples:

“Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.”

Jesus acknowledges that we live in a fallen world where there are always temptations to sin. But he explains that it is a terrible thing to be the person who causes somebody else to sin. The potential list of examples is very long.

In Ohio a five-year-old boy took a .22 caliber semi-automatic revolver to his kindergarten classroom. The teacher called the police and the boy was disarmed. The investigation indicated that a

16-year-old boy had given him the gun. If the facts are correct, this is a prime example of what Jesus meant when he said:

“... woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.”

Repeated surveys indicate that a high percentage of prostitutes were sexually molested when they were young. Those who abuse the young are terrible people who cause others to sin. And what about those who produce films and videos that incite others to violence? I would put them in the same category. Add to this list those who teach children to swear, introduce teens to drugs, seduce the innocent, create a wedge in a marriage that ultimately destroys it or otherwise cause people to sin in ways they would not otherwise have sinned. Sadly, the list is long.

Jesus admits that sin is an inevitable part of our fallen world when he says, “Things

that cause people to sin are bound to come.” Never be surprised by the creativity or the extent of wickedness. But never be the one who causes others to sin!

A more positive way to say this is that we should be good examples. As a Christian, be the kind of person who can always be imitated. Be a positive role model. If everyone else talked like you, gave like you, worked like you and lived like you would the world be a better place?

Jesus warned us not to cause others to sin and then added, “*So watch yourselves.*” He seemed to think that corrupting other people is easy to do. You don’t have to set out to do it; you can do it unwittingly, accidentally. But the way to avoid corrupting others is to always watch what you say and do because you are a constant influence on others.

A friend of mine repeatedly says, “Everything we do teaches.” He’s probably right. What we

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wear, what we say, the way we drive, even how we sit in a meeting teaches others how to dress, talk, drive or sit. Everything we do teaches, so be sure that you are not teaching others to sin. Watch yourselves!

Second on Jesus' list for getting along is potentially controversial. It is to "repeatedly forgive." According to Luke 17:3-5, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.*"

Here Jesus deals with a problem almost everyone everywhere faces. Someone sins against us. It may happen in any one of 10,000 ways. The other person lies, cheats, steals, assaults or otherwise behaves offensively. We may be the victim or we may simply be the observer of someone else's sin, but it offends us. What should we do?"

First, go to the other person and confront that person about what they have done. This is not usually easy! Most of us would rather tell someone else or carry a grudge, but that's not what Jesus tells us to do. Go to the other person and deal with the problem. Accept the responsibility yourself. Don't dump the responsibility for confrontation and rebuke on someone else. It's your job. If you are not willing to do this then you will have to let it go.

There may be some exceptions. An obvious exception would be a child who is somehow sinned against by an adult. It may be better to go to another adult to handle the situation. And, recognize that not every offense can be confronted. Some people are offended many times a day and feel they must confront every offense. The reality is that we have to let some things go. No one of us can resolve every difficulty.

Sometimes the other person will apologize and make things right. You are blessed. Now forgive—forgive and let it go. If he does it again, forgive him again. If you are sinned against seven times a day then forgive seven times a day.

When Jesus' followers heard this advice they said to the Lord, "*Increase our faith!*" In other words, "You are really going to have to help us on this one because it's really tough to keep forgiving someone who repeatedly sins against you."

Well, Jesus will help us. He will increase our faith. He will help us rebuke and he will help us to forgive. That is the Christian way.

Think about it! What is the alternative? The alternative is to resent the person who hurts us, try to get even and hold it against that person for the rest of our life. Any non-Christian is quite capable of such unforgiving attitudes and behavior. Jesus asks Christians to be different, to handle the extremely difficult and offensive relationships of life with godliness and forgiveness.

In January 1999 an Australian missionary doctor and his two sons fell asleep in their Jeep in a small village in India. During the night an anti-Christian mob attacked their vehicle, stuffing straw in the windows and under the truck and setting it on fire. They watched as Dr. Graham Staines, his 10-year-old son Phillip and his 6-year-old son Timothy burned to death.

His wife Gladys was left a widow with their third son as her only family. She had to decide what to do. She decided to stay in the village, forgive those who killed her husband and boys and continue the work of caring for leprosy patients. She grieved the loss of those she loved. She said that she was filled with sadness. But, she told the New York Times, "Whoever did this, we will forgive them"

Most of us will never have so much to forgive in our lifetime. If Jesus can help her to forgive so much, surely we can trust him to help us forgive far less. Let us not be filled with resentment. Let us not hold grudges. Let us not carry hurt and anger against neighbors, family, friends and coworkers. Let us do as Jesus calls us to do—forgive.

Number three on Jesus' "getting along" list is to live by faith. Jesus said, "*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.*"

This statement of Jesus is often misapplied. Some think if their faith is big enough and strong enough they can perform spectacular miracles. If that is what Jesus meant he would have suggested that big faith could enable a person to change lead to gold or make short people tall or sick people well. But, listen to the example Jesus uses and the context from which he speaks. Jesus says that a

little bit of faith the size of a mustard seed is enough to pick up a mulberry tree and plant it in the ocean. Why would anyone want to do such a thing? What good would it do to plant a tree in the sea? Jesus' example is farfetched to help us avoid misapplication. He's not talking about performing miracles; he's talking about getting along with people.

The point is that those who live by faith in God can live Christianly in their relationships. They can live so as not to cause others to sin. They can forgive those

who repeatedly sin against them. They can behave toward others in a good and godly way that would be impossible without faith in God. Those who trust God to empower and control their lives can do something supernatural—bigger and better than jumping a tree from land to sea—they can treat others right even when others treat them wrong!

Faith is confidence and trust in God. It is the conviction that God can do through you what you know you could never do by yourself. It is belief with all of your heart that God is in charge of your life. It is doing what is right even if there is no way of seeing how it can ever turn out for good. In order for us to all get along God's way—don't cause others to sin, repeatedly forgive, live by faith and faithfully serve God.

Jesus finishes his list in Luke 17:7-10 with a very unusual parable:

“Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 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.’”

To understand this parable of Jesus we must understand the times in which he lived since he

took his examples from everyday experiences of the people to whom he spoke. People were poor. Life was hard. Slavery was common. This does not mean he approved of poverty or slavery. If we were to do the same thing today we might talk about plane crashes and shootings and AIDS epidemics—news from our world—to illustrate how we are to live.

Jesus described the life of a slave to teach about the duty of a Christian. Slaves belonged to their masters. They worked long hard

hours. Their duties were never done. After a long day of labor in the fields the slave came home, not to rest but to work in the kitchen. When the slave finished he didn't expect the master to offer thanks or praise just because he had done his job.

Here Jesus is reminding us that Christians are in constant service to others as servants of Christ. Christianity is not a 9 to 5 job with evenings and weekends off. As Christian we are to do whatever God calls us to do, regardless of the hours or difficulty. There is no place for whining or complaining. It is our job to serve others whether we get praise or gratitude or not.

In the area of northeast Canada called Labrador there was a Christian physician named Dr. Grenfell. He was called to a home with a sick mother and father who both died shortly after he arrived. As there was no one else to make arrangements he set up the funeral and conducted the service himself. When the burial was complete five orphans were left sitting on top of the grave mound with nowhere to go and no one to take care of them. In his own words, he thought that he had done all a doctor should have to do, but “it looked as if God expected more.” It became his Christian duty to care for those five children.

Jesus taught that as Christians we are servants/slaves of Jesus Christ. We are to do whatever he wants us to do, go wherever he wants us to go, without complaint or expectation of special gratitude or reward. Our assumption should always be that God has given us his only Son, forgiven our sins, is with us through all the circumstances of

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life and guarantees us forever in heaven. There is nothing we could ever do to deserve such generosity from God. We will always be in debt to him. It is our privilege to serve him and even to suffer for him.

Frankly, this teaching of Jesus sounds very strange to many modern American ears. We tend to assume that we are in charge and God owes us. We are upset with God if he asks us to do anything we don't want to do. We are disappointed when God gives us less than we request. We feel cheated when our lives have pain or problems. There are many people who spend their lives whining and complaining and even being angry with God.

We must not forget that we are Christians who follow Jesus Christ who is described in Philippians 2:6-8 as follows:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross!

In other words, Jesus never asks us to experience anything he has not experienced for us. There is nothing that he ever asks us to do for him that he has not already done for us. The way to get along is to not to cause others to sin, repeatedly forgive, live by faith and become the servant of others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Charleen and I visited a lifelong friend who brought us up to date on her family's story. She and her husband met in college where we were all students together. All four of us dated and married around the same time. They entered Christian ministry and had two children. Their lives were full and happy until her husband decided to leave her for another man.

Although she had every right, she chose not to divorce him. She went back to school to become a teacher. She raised her children without any financial help. Her life was not easy but she remained stunningly faithful to Jesus Christ through astonishing pain and difficulty.

After 22 years her husband died of AIDS. Because they never divorced she was the one responsible for the funeral arrangements. The funeral home chapel was filled with his friends from the Miami area. She asked to speak and talked about their good years together and about the love of God through Jesus Christ. When the funeral was over she walked up to her husband's live-in lover and put her arms around him. She told him that she knew this must be a very hard time for him and asked what she could do to help.

As she told us this story I wiped the tears from my face. You see, what Jesus taught is not just theory and certainly it's not impossible. I've seen it for myself. This Christian friend lived out the words of Jesus Christ, setting an example of good amidst terrible hardship, repeatedly forgiving (for 22 years!), living by faith and faithfully serving God. In the name of Jesus Christ, may we all, as Christians, so live!

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