



Luke 17:1-4

“Innumerable Forgivenesses”

NKJ Luke 17:1 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!

2 "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

3 "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

4 "And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Up until this point, Jesus had been directing his teaching towards the Pharisees and dealing with their particular sins, now Jesus turns his attention to teaching his own disciples.

As we look at his teaching, we'll do so in two sections, the first will cover verses 1-2 and the first part of verse 3 and deal with offenses, and the second will cover verses 3 and 4 and deal with repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus starts by pointing out that it is impossible in this fallen world, filled as it is with sinful people, that *offenses* would stop occurring. Now the word translated in your bible *offenses*, doesn't mean the same thing that we generally mean when we use the word "offense." For instance, if you were to walk up and hit someone we might say that you have committed an *offense* against them. You have sinned against them.

But the Greek word that Jesus is using here *skandalon* means something different. A *Skandalon* is a trap or a snare, a rock that causes someone to trip, it is something put in someone's way that causes them to fall. What it means here is a temptation or incitement that causes someone to sin.

Jesus has warned against sinning by our actions. Now he is warning his followers against causing others to sin. He says that this is such a serious offense that those who commit it, would have been better off, if before they had done so, they suffered a violent death. They would be better off if they had a *Lithos Mulikos*, that is the giant upper mill stone turned by a donkey or a mule that went round and round and crushed the grain tied around their necks and throne into the sea. Thus assuring their certain death.

It would literally be better to be sunk down to the deepest depths of the ocean, than to be found unrepentantly guilty of this sin in the final judgment.

Now what does he mean by *little ones*? Well when we hear the word little ones, we instinctively think of children, but again that isn't what is meant here. Jesus doesn't use the word for child here - *teknon* or *paidion* – he uses the word *mikron* – little ones, the least of these. Who are these little ones, unimportant, the least in the eyes of the world? Well if we remember that this entire discourse started way back in chapter 15 with the Pharisees complaining about Jesus going after notorious sinners in an attempt to reclaim them we will understand of whom he is speaking. He is referring to these humble converts, the

prodigals, the lost coins, the found sheep. *Those for whom Christ died.* These people are nothing in the eyes of the world, and yet they are so special to God that he sent His only begotten son into the world to suffer humiliation and death in order to save them.

Jesus in Matthew 10:42 spoke of the rewards that would be given to those who treated his followers with kindness – ***"And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."*** Now he speaks of the terrible consequences that will befall those who cause his beloved sheep, the apple of his eye, to sin.

Now how does that happen? How does one place these snares or stumbling blocks before others? The mind boggles at the consideration of how many ways this can happen. But please allow me to suggest four major ways:

1) ***The first is by false teaching.*** False prophets and teachers can do enormous damage. I need only mention names like Jim Jones and David Koresh to drive home that point. There you had men who ultimately incited their followers to commit terrible sins, including murder and suicide. And as the world viewed those awful pictures of a burning compound in Waco or all those bodies in British Guyana next to tubs of cyanide laced kool-aid disgrace and dishonor were brought on the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ. False teachers are not a modern phenomenon though, the Apostle Peter himself writing to the church of his time in 2 Peter 2:1 after speaking of how the Old Testament scriptures were given by the inspired prophets of God then warned:

2 Peter 2:1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

2 And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.

3 By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

Now many people today, even within the church, loudly protest against any attempt to remove false teaching, to bring charges against false teachers, and in a word to protect the flock against heresy, and yet if we truly appreciate the words of scripture here, how can we take removing it seriously? These false teachings bring destruction upon those who follow them, cause the way of truth to be blasphemed, and are a cause of judgment to those who teach them! I myself am quite serious when I say, I would rather be slain than knowingly teach you heresy and always have James 3:1 ***My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*** In the back of my mind when I stand before you.

2) ***A Second way is by outright Persecution:*** How many have been caused to leave the faith, sign documents of recanting their faith, or betray their fellow Christians, by persecution. Sadly for all of the inspiring stories of people who persevered in the faith even unto death, like the one we heard of this morning, there are also stories of people who said "I have enough. If torture, unemployment, prison, and death is the price of following Christ, then I can't do it." ***Now all of these actions are properly sinful, but whose sin is greater, the one who denies his faith, or the one who causes him to deny it?***

3) ***A third way is by temptation:*** You can tempt someone to sin by example, or by enticing and encouraging. This is often more subtle than one thinks. Let me give you an example. Often Christians will think they haven't tempted anyone to sin because they don't dress in a provocative fashion, they avoid provoking men to anger, they don't use bad language or tell off-color jokes, they don't watch inappropriate movies, they don't gossip or encourage others to pass on gossip, and so on. They are a nice Christian

upright, decent, Christian congregation. But they cause their pastor to stumble by giving him a hard-time when he teaches the full-counsel of God especially the doctrines they don't particularly like. They display their irritation openly at those, and reward him when he avoids them, and gradually step-by-step he is taught to be a man-pleaser rather than God's ambassador. So at the end of the day he cannot truthfully say with Paul (Acts 20:26) ***"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.*** My friends it is no accident that the church today is chock full of pastors who will pat everyone on the back, but you can scarcely find a one who aims at conviction of sin and read Peter's sermon in Acts 2 sometime, if you don't think *convicting men of their sins* is a gospel imperative.

It is easier than you think, to set a *skandalon* before a brother or sister in Christ, and it is for this reason that Christ warned the disciples – take heed to yourselves, *watch yourself*, be on guard, err on the side of caution.

Which brings us to the second part of our sermon. But because it is impossible to live in a world without offenses, without sins, it is most necessary that Christians who live the world have the right attitude not only towards their own sin but those of others.

The first thing that Jesus admonishes his disciples to do, is never to simply pass by sin.

At a bible study once in Virginia, some friends of ours told us about an experience they'd had while looking for a new church. They invited the pastor and his family over to dinner and they served Italian food. During the dinner they were appalled as the Pastor's kids picked up their meatballs with their hands and rolled them on the table, got up and ran around, and then began leaving hand-prints on the walls. All the while the Pastor and his wife said not a word to them. Eventually, the wife, distraught at the ongoing destruction of their living room suggested that perhaps the Pastor's kids weren't hungry and that they might like to go downstairs to the playroom. They eagerly accepted that offer and ran downstairs. A few minutes later they began to hear thump, thump sounds coming from the ceiling. So our friend got up to find out what was going on, he was appalled to find that the pastor's kids had taken his pool cues out and were using them to poke holes in the acoustic tile of the ceiling. He grabbed them by the scruff of their necks and marched them back to their parents and told them what their kids had been up to. The Pastor didn't say a word to them and went on talking about what he had been. Finally our friend interrupted and said "aren't you going to discipline your children?" To which the shocked Pastor replied *"How could I preach a gospel of forgiveness of sins and yet rebuke my own children for sins that have all been forgiven by Jesus?"* At that point, our friends firmly determined this would not be a church they would be attending, because that friends, is nothing but antinomianism, *lawlessness*. The gospel is not a license to sin. Our sins were not paid for by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, in order that we might be freed to sin watonly:

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

Ezek. 36:26 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

1 John 2:3 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.

4 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

You are called to holiness, and if you truly love of your brothers and sisters in Christ, when they sin against you, you will rebuke them. Not gossip about them, rebuke them. God-willing this will result in them repenting, and when they repent, you forgive them.

How many times, seven times in a day, this is not the limit so that the eighth time <wham> you sock 'em one. Seven is the biblical number of wholeness, you keep on forgiving them.

This biblical idea our sins, followed by sincere repentance, confession and then free and full forgiveness is enshrined in our confessional documents:

(Page 857 Trinity Hymnal) WCF Chapter 15.VI. As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

Ok, but if I do that its going to lead them into a cycle of sinning against me then repenting. Well, suppose he does so, that is precisely what you are doing, except that you do not go often repent when you sin. So, possibly, the offender is rather better than you are, after all, and if God is gentle in his dealings with you, you may well be gentle in your dealings with your neighbor. As Spurgeon put it so well "Seven times a day that you have to forgive your brother are but a small number compared with the innumerable forgivenesses granted to you by our ever-gracious God."

"It is the duty of the brethren, or of the Church, when offended, to forgive the offending party and restore him fully to favor upon his repentance ... The Christian is, in addition, brought under obligations to forgive others by his own infinite obligation to his Lord, who not only forgave us upon repentance, but died to redeem us while we were unrepentant. As to public scandals, the Church is bound to forgive them when the Lord has done so. As genuine repentance is the gift of Christ, its evident exercise is a certain indication that the person exercising it is forgiven by Christ and is a Christian brother."

Brothers and Sisters, dismiss this concept and you dismiss the heart of the gospel. Christ is actually asking us to do far less than He has done for us: 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.