

5. Sinners and Servants

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Date: 25 March 2012

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to read from the Bible now, and two readings this evening in Luke's Gospel. First, I'd like you to turn, please, to chapter 14.

This is an important little section for the passage we're going to be looking at this evening in chapter 17. Let me read from verse 15. When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat in the kingdom of God.

But Jesus said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who'd been invited, Come, for everything's now ready. But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I've bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please have me excused. And another said, I've bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them.

Please have me excused. And another said, I've married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

[1 : 30] And the servant said, Sir, what you commanded has been done, and there is still room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled.

For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. Now, over to chapter 17, please. Verse 1. And Jesus 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 apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord 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.

[2 : 48] Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him, when he's coming from the field, Come at once and recline at table. Will he not rather say, Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterwards you'll eat and drink.

Does he thank his servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you've done all that you were commanded, say, We are unworthy servants.

We have only done what was our duty. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and we thank him for it.

Be very grateful if you turn your Bible to Luke chapter 17, and as you're doing that, let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you're a loving God and a speaking God. And again we pray that you would please speak to us as we come to your word.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. It is not always easy to understand the Bible, is it? Sometimes it is not easy to understand the Bible because the things it says are hard to swallow.

[4 : 02] Difficult things. Sometimes it is hard to understand the Bible because the words themselves are complicated. We read them and we think, What's that going on about? Today's passage is a real puzzle.

I wonder if you found that as we read it. But it is not because it's particularly, particularly hard to swallow. There are some difficult statements in it, like for example verse 2 is quite a difficult statement.

Neither is it because the words are in themselves especially hard to understand. Read through there and most of the sentences kind of make sense, don't they?

No, the difficulty of today's passage is, How on earth do these little bits hang together? Didn't you think that as you were reading? I mean if you didn't, let me just point you at the fact that they're very difficult.

Now look for example at verse 2. Who are these little ones? Have we seen any children in the story so far? I don't remember them, not recently anyway.

[5 : 11] What's in view here? Somebody causing children to sin? Is this a warning about how God views child abuse or something like that? And then verse 3, straight after.

There's a sentence about rebuking and forgiving sins. How on earth does that follow on from the bit that came before? And then verse 5.

The apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. Why do they say that? What is it about what's just been said that makes them say that? And then verse 6, a statement that seems to suggest they don't really need their faith to be increased at all.

A small one will do. And then verse 7, a story about a master and a servant. And again one has to ask, what on earth has that to do with what's just gone before?

Puzzled? Well, the translators of the ESV Bible certainly were. They just put a heading at the start of each one, Temptations to Sin, Increase Our Faith, Unworthy Servants, which kind of says, we haven't got a clue how these fit together either, but we'll give them a title anyway.

[6 : 21] The truth is that, on their own, these little bits don't make much sense together. But if you put them into the storyline of this book, well, they make perfect sense.

And what's more, they're absolutely relevant and practical instructions given what Jesus has just been talking about. So, let's spend the first few moments just reminding ourselves of the story so far in this little bit of Luke's Gospel.

Let me introduce it to you if you're here for the first time. This little block, 17, 1 to 10, belongs to a bigger block. How do we know that?

Well, the writer didn't write his book with headings. Instead, he put in a number of little journey markers along the story, milestones along the route of the story to remind the hearers where they are.

And actually, they're almost literally milestones because in this part of the story, Jesus is on a journey physically. Now, just look with me at the on the road to Jerusalem milestones that there are in this story.

[7 : 36] The next one is in 17:11. Look at that, please, would you? On the way to Jerusalem, he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. There's a milestone. Remember, we're on the journey to Jerusalem, Luke is saying.

Let me point out the previous one to that. Right back to chapter 14 and verse 25. Here's another little journey statement.

Now, great crowds accompanied him. He's on a journey. He's going in a particular direction. Lots of people are going along with him. In between those two milestones, there are no breaks.

Jesus talks first to one group of people, then to another, then to another. But all the way through, the same big ideas are running. What are the big ideas in this section?

We ought to be asking, how does this little bit at the end, chapter 17, the little bit before the next milestone, how does it tie up the issues that have been running?

[8 : 43] And what are those issues? Well, here are the issues. The big issues are in chapter 15, verses 1 and 2. Now, back in chapter 14, in the previous section of the journey, Jesus has been talking about a great banquet coming at the end.

I read that passage earlier. A great celebration to celebrate the arrival of God's kingdom. And at the beginning of chapter 15, we have the very surprising welcome of certain people into the group that's following Jesus.

Here's Jesus' big exhortation at the end of chapter 14. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

Listen to me, says Jesus, and lots of people pile in to listen, including some very dodgy people. The last sort of people you'd expect to be there.

And Jesus welcomes them. And there's a scandal. He's accepting people into his group who really oughtn't to be there and really oughtn't to be heading for that banquet in the end.

[10:07] At least, those present at the time don't think so. The Pharisees and the scribes grumble, this man receives people like that and eats with them.

Now, that idea kicks off the whole of this section. And the whole of this section is about that subject in one way or another. What sort of people does Jesus receive?

What sort of people can be there in the banquet at the end? Who's in and why and who's out and why? And he talks to one group and then another about this subject matter.

First, to the Pharisees. Verse 3 of chapter 15. He told the Pharisees this parable. And it's a parable about lost things. And the big point of the parable is this.

You guys might not like these people turning up and following me, but heaven rejoices when people like this come and listen to my words.

[11:16] And then, chapter 16, he talks to his disciples. 16.1. He also said to his disciples, and again, the subject is related to this big issue.

If God loves it when people repent, well, you ought to be using the resources that God has given you in this world so that people like this will be in your welcoming party when the great banquet arrives.

And then, chapter 16, verse 15, he talks to the Pharisees again. The Pharisees think it's a stupid idea to be using worldly resources for people like this because they love money and the things of this world.

And he says to them that the enormous danger of loving money rather than loving God and one's neighbor is something to be desperately avoided. And then, finally, 17.1, to the disciples.

Do you see how it goes? The big issue. Who does Jesus welcome? Who can be in the banquet at the end? And he talks to the Pharisees and the disciples and the Pharisees and the disciples and the thing that's running through is the same thing all the way through.

[12:35] What kind of God is God? What sort of people does he accept? What sort of people can be in? Do you see it's the issue of who Jesus loves, who Jesus welcomes into his people that sparks this whole section off and runs all the way through.

Will Jesus hear us whether Pharisees or disciples, will they share the things he loves?

Will they love the people he loves? And that's what brings this issue right up to date. See, if you're a follower of Jesus, the things he loves are to flow over into your life.

If you love someone, their loves spill over into your life. Let me illustrate. I have a friend called Rachel. She's quite posh, really.

Six or seven years ago, if you'd said to Rachel, Rachel, how much do you like football? She'd have said, eh, not much really, in rather a posh voice. But that's before she met Michael.

[13:53] Do you know, Rachel has been many times in the last six or seven years to see, of all teams, Darlington FC.

That is an enormously cross-cultural thing for her to do. She doesn't sound a bit Northeastern, not a bit. She's never had an interest in minor league football before. And when she sings, we are Darley, we are Darley, we are Darlington, in a rather posh voice.

It is because she loves him and his loves have overflowed into her life. A trivial example, but we know this to be true, don't we?

When we love someone, well, the stuff that they like, we begin to like. Just the same with Jesus. Love him while his loves spill over into your life.

Listen to him, his ideas take root in your life. Love is actually the big idea in this section. It started off really in 1426.

[15:01] Flip back to 1426 would you? Right at the beginning of this section of the journey, great crowds accompanied him and he turned and said to them, if anyone comes to me and doesn't hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he can't be my disciple.

Love's turned on their head by following Jesus. If you're going to come with me, if you're going to follow me, if you're going to listen to me, you have to love what I love.

The people I love, not just the people you naturally love, your family, your friends, but especially the people I'm loving. A new family made it, turns up out, of all sorts of people.

Chapter 15, verse 1. Let me suggest to you that chapter 17 finishes off that discussion. And it's really all about the dynamics of this new family, this new set of relationships, these people that Jesus loves.

And here we have certain very important principles for life in this new family. Life among the people that Jesus loves. What's it going to be like loving the people that Jesus loves?

[16 : 21] Well, let me look at this under several headings. First, don't cause little ones to sin. 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, that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves.

Question, who are these little ones? Well, let me suggest that in view of the preceding discussion, these little ones must be the new additions to the family, the people of chapter 15, the dodgy ones, the ones you wouldn't expect to be in, the newcomers, how might they be caused to sin, do you think?

Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Imagine you're a first century Palestinian tax collector. You've spent years cheating people and collaborating with the occupying Roman forces, and you've just started listening to and following a preacher from Galilee, and you've just begun to take his words seriously, and he seems to make sense.

But don't you think it might be difficult to leave that lifestyle behind? You've been doing it for a long time. And don't you think it might be difficult that the people who are following him, apart from you, are people that you've been betraying and cheating for years and years and years?

[18 : 02] Don't you think that might be difficult? The crowd following Jesus contains some very religious people to whom you know you'll be a real outsider.

You're beginning to think you can be acceptable to God, but will you be accepted by these people? Well, that's a difficult one, isn't it? Temptations to sin are bound to come, says Jesus.

Yes, there are going to be temptations to run away from the new thing and back to the old thing, but it's not going to take much to make you run away from this group of people, is it?

A few looks, what on earth is he doing here? A few overhead comments, look who's just come in, look, she's the last person I'd expect to see here.

Jesus says, you make one of my little ones turn away. Better to be lost forever in the depths of the ocean with a heavy weight around your neck.

[19 : 14] That's how important they are. Watch yourselves, he says, to his disciples. We do need to watch ourselves about this, don't we?

I have all sorts of things going on inside, deeply ingrained attitudes. They come from years and years of attitude building, which make me react to people at gut level in ways that are not godly, that don't reflect the kind of love that Jesus shows.

We're to watch ourselves. Second, Jesus talks about love in God's family. The new family will be marked by an other-centered seriousness about sin and about forgiveness.

Let me read verses 3 and 4. 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 issue here is how we deal with the fact that people in the family still have a sin problem. Now, there's a wonderful realism about this, isn't there?

[20 : 32] followers of Jesus still fall into sin. He expects that that's the case, doesn't he? He doesn't envisage that you get cleaned up instantly, you enter the door and never have a problem with sin ever again.

These words don't assume that. And isn't that a wonderful relief to hear, isn't it? You don't get into Jesus' family by being a good performer and you don't continue in Jesus' family by being a good performer.

Sin is an ongoing problem, that has to be dealt with. Of course, Christians in various ways can behave as though that's not the case at all. Pretend that sin doesn't happen and ignore it when it does.

Or, when it does, treat it as though it's completely unexpected. Get terribly upset. And these instructions do neither of those.

Two things are instructed here. First, when sin happens, it will. When it happens, correct it. Don't pretend it's not sinful.

[21 : 41] Don't ignore it. Correct it. When your brother sins, rebuke him. Now, I don't think the point here is that we're all to go around all the time ticking each other off, looking for all the faults that we

might find.

I mean, you could spend all day every day doing that and not come to an end of it. There's plenty of faults to find, aren't there? No, it is possible to indulge in that kind of self-righteousness, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

No, he's describing here love for people. It is not kind or loving to leave sin unaddressed.

Think around the whole little ones idea for a moment. We don't, parents, do we? We don't let our children go unchallenged if they're doing what's wrong or bad for them.

So when you see your two-year-old with a screwdriver exploring the electrical fittings, you don't say, what a chip-hold off the old block inquiring mind, go to it, son.

[22 : 44] No, we take the screwdriver away, wallop him so he won't do it again. That's the way it goes, isn't it? To leave that unchallenged is to demonstrate we don't care.

Consider the teachers you had at school, the ones who had your respect. Were they not the ones who would exercise a degree of discipline? The ones who would correct things that were unhelpful for the group?

The ones we have no respect for are the ones who leave wrongdoing unchallenged. When there are things that ought to be put right in God's family, just shutting up, ignoring it, doing nothing, doesn't demonstrate love for anyone.

When I'm falling into sin, the thing I need most is for someone who sees it to come and gently remind me that that is not what I ought to be doing.

It's not good for me to keep doing that unchallenged. When sin happens, correct it, says Jesus. It will happen. Do something about it.

[23 : 59] But, when people repent, forgive them. If he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying I repent, you must forgive him.

This one's rather enlarged on and it makes one think it might be quite important really. And interestingly, this command provokes a reaction.

Verse five, Lord, increase our faith. Apparently, they think that this statement, the one about forgiving the repentant, is a faith challenging statement.

Why is that? My Christian brother came along and said, look, I'm very sorry. I've done this and I shouldn't. I don't want to do it anymore. Please forgive me.

I think to myself, well, that might not be too hard really. two things to say about that. First, it might be harder than I think. Little things are easy to forgive.

[24 : 59] Little repentances are easy to deal with. Big things, not so easy. But it might also have something to do with the context.

Remember, the context here is of rather suspect people being welcomed into the kingdom of God. people the disciples would normally be suspicious of, cheats, betrayers.

If one of them comes and says he's repentant, how am I going to respond? Maybe they're people with bad habits, people who've been living the dodgy life for a long time, people whose habits of sin will be difficult to break.

How serious am I going to be if one of those people comes to ask for forgiveness, and then does it again next week, and the week after, and the week after that.

How am I going to respond then? Continue to love this person as somebody that Jesus has loved, or treat them with the suspicion that I always really thought they deserved?

[26 : 10] Can you see why we get verse five? Lord, increase our faith. That's a difficult thing to ask. They understand how difficult that might be, because of the sorts of people that Jesus is welcoming.

People who might take you for a ride, tax collectors heavens, people you might be very suspicious of. We're going to need a lot of faith to deal with that, says Jesus.

And he responds, no, not really, not a lot, just the right sort. Verse six, the Lord said, if you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, a tiny little bit, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.

You don't need much. It's not the quantity, it's the quality. And the story that follows, verse seven following, the story that follows is about the quality, not the quantity.

Let me read the story again. will any 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 table.

[27 : 21] Will he not rather say to him, prepare supper for me, dress properly, serve me while I eat and drink, afterward you can eat and drink. Does he thank the servant because what he did was

commanded? So you also, when you've done all that you were commanded, say we're unworthy servants, we've only done what was our duty.

The story expects the answer no. Do you welcome your servant in and sit around the table and take his boots off and wipe his face and give him a big meal?

No, you don't do that. They don't do that in that culture. Now it sounds a bit cold to us, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be nice if the master did thank his servant? How ungrateful. But that is to misunderstand the story from the social norms of our age, where duty as a virtue is almost gone for good.

This would have been a familiar scenario to everyone in that culture at that time. All of the questions Jesus asked would have been met with instant answers.

No, no, no, no, no, no. That's not what the master does. Would the master thank his servant? No. The point is, a servant is a servant.

[28 : 39] A servant has the duties of a servant. That's what a servant does. When he's been working hard in the field all day and he's tired and thirsty and hungry, his job is to come in and provide food.

It's part of the deal if you're a servant in that culture. And that's the way it is with disciples, says Jesus. Jesus' servants have duties.

duties. That's the nature of the arrangement. Servants have duties. All Jesus' disciples, from the biggest to the smallest, the best behaved to the worst behaved, have family duties.

We are not people who by nature have rights in the relationship with our master. The master sets the agenda. And the servants are to do what they are told.

And one of the family duties is about taking sin seriously and forgiving it when repentance is done. It's part of the deal.

[29 : 52] It's part of the deal for everybody who follows Jesus. And when some members of the family look down on others, well they've forgotten who they are. And if we're unwilling to correct sin because it would be more comfortable to ignore it, we've forgotten who we are.

And if we're unwilling like the apostles here to forgive when people repent, even if they repent loads of times, we've forgotten how God has treated us. Started to think that somehow we're better than unworthy servants.

truth is of course that if God were to treat us like that, if God were to be unwilling to forgive when we have to repent again and again and again, we would be totally up a gum tree spiritually, wouldn't we?

Christian, have you not found yourself coming back to God and asking for his forgiveness again and again and again, so that you're tired of doing it almost because you've said the words so many times before, God loves it when people repent, chapter 15, does he not?

It's the way he treats us. He forgives us. See, the whole business of accepting others is not to do with the size of our faith, but the quality.

[31 : 32] It's to do with what sort of faith we have, what sort of God we trust in. Do we believe in a God who welcomes the undeserving? Then we will welcome the undeserving.

Do we believe in a God who welcomes the deserving? Then we'll welcome only those who think they're deserving, who we think are deserving. Do we believe in a God who welcomes the undeserving?

Well, that will show itself in the kind of love that is serious about sin, not neglecting it, and radical about forgiveness when people repent.

The basic issue that runs through the whole of this section is what kind of God is God, and what kind of people does he love? And the bottom line is that God accepts people quite differently from the way that we do, quite differently, not because of our performance, not because of how nicely we scrub up, never because of those things.

Martin Luther, this wonderful phrase to describe the position of a Christian, at the same time righteous and a sinner, and always righteous and a sinner.

[33 : 05] Justified sinners we are, from the beginning to the end, nothing about it is ever to do with our performance. It's not our performance at the entrance that's the issue, neither is our performance in the continuing of the Christian life that is the issue.

We are, at the end, unworthy servants, verse 10. From first to last, beginning to end, we are never acceptable because of our performance.

