

Jesus said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! <sup>2</sup> It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. <sup>3</sup> Watch yourselves.

“If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup> Even if he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times returns to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” <sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

<sup>6</sup> The Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. <sup>7</sup> Which one of you who has a servant plowing or taking care of sheep will say to him when he comes in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at the table’? <sup>8</sup> Won’t the master tell him instead, ‘Prepare my supper, and after you are properly dressed, serve me while I eat and drink. After that you may eat and drink’? <sup>9</sup> He does not thank the servant because he did what he was commanded to do, does he? <sup>10</sup> So also you, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.’”

—Luke 17:1-10

We’ve all been in these situations, haven’t we? Somebody we know is giving in to a sin, and this somebody is somebody we know well – our dad or mom, one of our kids or one of our siblings, the guy who sits next to us at church council or choir, the gal who teaches Sunday School, the friend we were confirmed with, the classmate we come to church with. The devil has dangled a temptation in front of somebody we know and that somebody has bit hard.

Jesus is talking about sins that begin to control the way a Christian thinks and lives. It is missing the mark of what God says is right. Your mom files for divorce after being married to your dad for 30 years. She says she just doesn’t love him anymore. It’s not right. Your roommate parties half the night every night. It’s not right! Your brother can’t come to family gatherings without getting sloshed. It’s not right! Your little sister moves in with her boyfriend to save money. It’s not right! Your classmate from high school comes out of the closet. It’s not right! Your friend from church isn’t there anymore. It’s not right!

If someone would have told you last year or two years ago that any of this could have happened to this person you know and love, you would have laughed. “Are you kidding? He’s in church every Sunday. She reads her Bible all the time. He’s as straight as an arrow. She comes from a solid family. He would never do that.”

Oh, think again. You see, that’s the trouble with sin. Jesus himself said it, **“Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Watch yourselves.”** Watch your life very carefully. Sin has a tendency to take over. When sin begins to control people, it changes the way they talk and think and act. They do things they never did before. We can see it.

What we *can’t* see is how sin is changing that person’s heart. We can’t see the battle that’s raging between sin and faith. Sin shouts, “Do it,” and faith screams, “Don’t do it.” We go through those battles every day; we know what they’re like. But when the sin becomes obvious and consistent, it’s a sign that faith has stopped screaming and sin is winning. And when faith stops screaming, it’s either because faith is weak and wounded or because faith is dead. And if faith is dead, the only highway we are driving on through life is the highway that leads to hell.

And when you know people in your family, in your church, in your life, people who are caught in these sins, Jesus gives you a difficult task. It’s not an easy duty that Jesus gives to us.

**“If your brother sins...”** If it looks as though someone you love is losing a battle with sin, **“rebuke him.”** Look at him eyeball to eyeball and tell him what’s happening in his life. Show him the fault of his actions which come from his attitude and thoughts. Point out to her the destructive highway she is on. Jesus says, “Do this!” Don’t just think about it! Do it! Rebuke him. **“If he repents...”** If he sees the destruction toward which he is heading... If he sees the death trap that is being set in his life... If she sees the path toward hell that sin is pushing her on... If he is ready for a change in his life... a 180-degree turn... **“forgive him.”** Send it away. Sink it in the depths of the sea. Throw it overboard and never bring it up again.

I think what Jesus is telling us to do here is extremely hard. I really do. Go and tell a brother or sister that because of their sin they are separating themselves from God. That’s hard to do, isn’t it? Because sometimes, sometimes they won’t listen right away. When you go to your brother and show his fault, it may hurt him. It may hurt his pride. He may get mad. Your mom may not understand. Your little sister may tell you to drop dead. Your friend may say he’s had it with the church. But is it worth the pain and agony and the consistency to keep them out of hell? You see, we must have the proper perspective of this.

Parents, if one of your children is ever in a car accident, and if you are standing next to his bed in the trauma center of some hospital and a doctor says to you, "We either take off his leg now or we lose him. What's it gonna be?" ... what are you going to say? With tears streaming down your face, you will say, "Take off his leg." And you will hear the screams and the protests, and you will feel his fists pounding against your body, but I bet you would make the same decision every time. If you see a chance to save the life of a child you love, you are going to do it no matter how much it hurts. Is this not true?

Oh, how much more for someone you love who is caught in sin. It may hurt, but you have the one thing, the one *person* who can heal them. You have Jesus. And only Jesus can take a person's sin away. Maybe it will hurt a person's pride or ego, but with Jesus you can save their life. Is this hard? Oh, yes. Is this serious stuff? It's a matter of life and death.

But I would also venture to say that the next thing Jesus says is equally, if not even more difficult. Always forgive. It doesn't matter how many times this person sins against you. **"If he repents, forgive him."** That's not always easy to do. You see, we have a tendency to remember. We like to keep score. We tend to keep track of how often someone sins against us. So, Jesus words are really difficult. **"Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."**

Really, Jesus? How about three times? The three-strikes, you're out approach. What about seven times? Jesus isn't giving us an option. He is telling us that we need to do this. Don't count.

How can we do this? You know the phrase, "Forgive and forget," right? That's not easy. A member of our congregation reminded me of another saying to help us do this. "Forgive and remember." Remember what? Remember what Jesus has done for you. You see, that's so important.

Jesus stepped in and took your sin upon himself. He became sin for us. When we recognize our lost condition, despairing of ourselves and our abilities to make things right with God, he gently bends down to us and lifts us up. He fills us with his love and mercy. It's there! It's on the cross. God made Jesus to be sin in your place.

And every day that grace and mercy and forgiveness are yours. It is new every morning. We remember what Jesus has done for us. That's the reason we can forgive others.

The disciples knew this was serious stuff. Therefore, they prayed, **"Increase our faith."** Is that not our prayer? **Lord, increase our faith.**

And Jesus' response to you is: I have. I have given you such a faith. I have supplied you with the power to accomplish the difficult duty. That's why it is so important for us to stay close to God's Word. How can we show someone his sin if we don't know what the Bible says a sin is? How can we know the depths toward which a person can fall if we don't hear it from God's Word? How can we find the courage and the power to forgive someone if we aren't hearing the voice of Jesus forgiving us? His words will guide us to make the right decisions, even when they are hard decisions. His words will help us see the necessity of tough love. His words will remind us that he seeks those who stray and wander from his love, and he wants us to do the same.

And we don't do it because we are somehow going to be better people. We don't do these hard tasks as a way to hold them over someone else. We don't do this to even receive a pat on the back from Jesus. No, listen to Jesus. **"So also you, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.'"**

The more we know and understand the grace of God that is poured into our lives, the more we will delight in this duty that Christ has given to us. Christ has equipped us and empowered us to do this amazing task, what we are supposed to do. We have a humbling and exalting duty of taking people we know off of the interstate that leads to hell and on to the path that leads to heaven. Jesus gives you his permission and his authority to do this. Jesus wants you to do this because he loves those people. And if you ask, "What if I haven't done this before?" Jesus says, "I forgive you. Now go." If you ask, "Can I do this?" Jesus says, "Yes you can. You can do all things because I'll give you the strength. I have given you that faith." And you can trust Jesus. Jesus knows best. He is sending you.

Let us pray. Lord, I delight in what you want me to do. You know what is best for my life and the life of your people. Lord, increase my faith, my trust in you, so that my faithfulness will also increase. Amen.