

Integrity – Faith – Thanksgiving (Luke 17:1-19)



Jesus was moving steadfastly towards Jerusalem from Luke 9. Now time is very short, and Jesus spends much time in training His disciples. From here on, end time themes feature very frequently in His teaching. Jesus spent three years turning the ordinary fishermen into the ‘fishers of men.’ There is no short cut to our training as Jesus’ disciples. But if we really allow the Lord to train us, He can achieve a lot in three years.

Jesus did not always use a ‘classroom setting’. He often combined his teaching with lessons from ‘real life situations’ as He does here. Jesus deals with the three themes below in preparation for the end-time teaching that will follow later.

They are (A) Integrity; (B) Faith / Faithfulness; (C) Thanksgiving / Gratitude.

A. Integrity

1. Jesus starts by answering the question, ‘What is the worst thing that a believer can do, other than to sin? Is there such a thing?’ The answer is ‘Yes’. It is when a believer causes other believers to sin, i.e. ‘to cause someone to stumble and fall away from his faith in Christ, especially new believers.’ How do we do that?
 - a. By being directly offensive and hurtful to them in word or deed.
 - b. By misguiding them with false teaching. In Jesus’ days, the Pharisees made God’s word impossible to understand and to obey. Today we can go in the opposite direction by teaching sin is somewhat acceptable to God, e.g. Jesus already forgave you on the cross, so you don’t need to repent for your sins.
 - c. By displaying huge gaps between our claims of faith and our practice of faith. The scandals in the church often shock and shake God’s people, stumbling the new and weak believers. In Greek, ‘*skandalon*’ means to ‘scandalise’.
2. Jesus warned this is inevitable (v1). His church in the last days will go through shocking scandals (Matt 24:10) because (1) lawlessness will increase (Matt 25:12), and (2) false prophets will increase (Matt 24:11). When we see these things take place, it is proof we are living in the last days.

Jesus also warned: ‘*Woe unto him through whom these scandals come!*’ ‘*It is better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea,*’ (v2) He was better off dead than to live and cause others to stumble and sin. Millstone is the ‘ancient industrial grinder’ that the animals pushed to grind wheat.

‘*Take heed to yourselves*’ (v3) is the key verse. Jesus was speaking to His disciples! ‘Make sure you never get into such a place in your life or ministry.’

3. Then we also must deal with offences and scandals in the church. How? By building ‘integrity’ into our lives.
 - a. When a fellow believer sins and ‘scandalises’ us, we must be prepared to rebuke him directly. Confronting a brother when he sins, is a very difficult thing to do. It is a costly exercise requiring much prayer, courage, and wisdom. And we will never know if we have done it in the best way at the best timing possible. But we must seek to remove the sin in our brother’s life. This is ‘integrity’.

What then is ‘lack of integrity’? Holding grudges against our brother and spreading it to others. This only spread sin and scandalises others. Those who have enough love to rebuke a brother, also have enough love to forgive him. Those who do not have the courage to rebuke, do not have the courage to forgive. If we are prepared to confront, we must be prepared to forgive.

- b. Jesus said, ‘*If your brother sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.*’ (v4) We stop counting his sins and questioning his sincerity. Why? If we fail to remove the sin from the brother, then forgiveness is the only way out of being offended and scandalised ourselves. In trying to heal a sick person, we must take care not to be infected ourselves.

One young man who was deeply hurt by a pastor in the past, could not trust any church leaders. Forgiving is not trusting the person whom we have forgiven. But the refusal to forgive will shut our heart from trusting others, including God. Our heart works as one single unit. When it’s wounded, it affects all our relationships. So, Jesus gave us one condition in prayer, ‘forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us.’

B. Faith / Faithfulness

1. *'Increase our faith!' (v5)* The apostles reacted comically to Jesus' command to unconditionally forgive an offending brother.
 - a. At first, the disciples' request sounds like a wonderful prayer. Jesus commended 'great faith' twice in the gospels. But what is wrong with this request? Don't we all need greater faith to do greater things for God?
 - b. Jesus corrects the apostles' request because it was a prayer trying to shift the responsibility from us to God. *'Lord, it is too difficult for us to do! So, Lord, increase our faith and make it happen!'*
2. *Jesus said, 'If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be plucked up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'* (v6)

A mustard seed is so tiny we can barely see it, and a mulberry tree is known for its deep unshakable roots. Jews believed them to stand for 600 years. In this stunning teaching on the power of faith, Jesus reveals two things about faith.

- a. Don't focus on the size of faith, but on the 'genuineness of faith.' Sometimes we compare the size of one person's faith to another. This comes from pride. If you have 'genuine faith', even a minute amount of it will be powerful and effective for you in doing what God has called you to do.
- b. Don't focus on the size of faith, but on the 'exercise of the faith' we already have. Faith is like a muscle. When you exercise it, it grows. But if you don't use it, it shrinks. We need to exercise the faith muscle we already have.

We need to examine if our prayer is simply passing our responsibility over to God, instead of obeying God by using the faith we already have. Faith without works is dead.

3. Then how do we discern the 'genuineness of faith'? *'Which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep...Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty.'* (17:7-10)

- a. Why does Jesus teach this immediately after the lesson on the 'power of faith'? Because the acid test on the 'genuineness of faith' is in the humility and faithfulness with which we serve God. Everybody wants spectacular results rather than the mustard seed faith which is hardly noticed by others.

Note that in Greek, the word for 'faith' and 'faithfulness' is the same, *'pistis'*.

- b. How do we know that our faith in the Lord is genuine? When we don't have the expectation or need to be thanked or acknowledged for the service we have given to God, whether we serve Him in small or big things. Because we know that it is only the rightful duty that we owe God as His servants.

To the degree we expect special acknowledgment for something we have done, to that degree we assume God owes us. And to the degree we don't receive special thanks, it will anger us and stumble us. Because we gave our service as a *favour* to the Lord, not out of our faith in Him. Our faith will not grow in such service or ministry.

Note, there is not one recorded case in the gospels where Jesus thanks someone for doing what He told them to do.

- c. It doesn't mean we should not exercise the ministry of encouragement, appreciating or thanking one another. But those who serve, must do so as our duty and our calling, not expecting somebody to thank us.
 - Those who are free from people's praises are also free from people's criticisms.
 - The best servants of God are those who are grateful to serve Him in any capacity at all. They know it is a great privilege to serve Him in anything.
 - Those who require regular thanks are the most ineffective servants with weak faith.

Apostle Paul wrote, *'For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!'* (1 Cor 9:16)

C. Thanksgiving / Gratitude

1. Jesus is again on the move toward Jerusalem, and we find Him passing through the border of Samaria and Galilee (v11). After this, Jesus' pace quickens to Jericho, then Jerusalem. But why was He back in Samaria here, when He had left Samaria a while ago? Just a few days before, Jesus was in Perea which was near Jerusalem. (C.f. Luke 14) It was because Jesus had unfinished business in Samaria, even though the Samaritans rejected Him last time He was there. (C.f. 9:55-56)
2. There Jesus was met by ten lepers at the gate, who cried out to Him, *'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'* (v12-13) They observed the legal distance (Lev 13:46; Num 5:2-3). They must have heard about Jesus healing lepers. Leprosy was an incurable and infectious disease, so the sufferers were removed from society and their families. It was a terribly lonely disease. These lepers squatted between Samaria and Galilee, so that if one region forced them out, they would go to the other side of the border, and visa-versa. That's why Jesus met them at the border of Samaria and Galilee.
3. Jesus healed lepers before. (C.f. Luke 5:12ff) So what is new this time?
 - a. They were a group of lepers, ten of them. Not an individual.
 - b. Jesus didn't lay His hands on them to heal them. He made them exercise their faith.
 - c. The one who returned to give thanks was not only a leper but also a Samaritan. He was a Samaritan living among Jews. The horror of their disease brought these Jewish and gentile lepers together. All of them were disfigured and unclean from leprosy and dying together.
4. Jesus did not heal them by laying His hands on them but made them exercise their faith by sending them to the priests for 'health inspection' (Lev 14:2ff). They had to act on Jesus' word with their mustard seed faith.
 - a. What if they didn't get healed by the time they got to the priest? Jesus might be gone when they return to receive prayer from Him instead! They had to exercise their faith in Jesus' word and obey.
 - b. Which priest were they go to? There were two temples and two priesthood – Jerusalem for the Jews further away, and Mt Gerizim for the Samaritans nearby. Jesus did not specify which one.
 - c. As they acted on Jesus' word and went their way, healing began to take place for all ten lepers. In sheer excitement nine of them probably ran a marathon all the way to Jerusalem to show themselves to the priest and then to re-join their Jewish community. It was a long journey, and they were not coming back!

But one of them, a Samaritan whose temple was nearby at Mt Gerizim, didn't complete his journey to freedom. He ran back to find Jesus again, this time to give thanks for what God had done. He probably thought, *'If I don't run back to give thanks to God before Jesus, I might miss Him!'* When he returned, Jesus was still in town! (1) With a loud voice this man glorified God, (2) fell on his face at Jesus' feet, and (3) gave Him thanks. And this was a Samaritan whose temple theology is all messed up! (v16)
5. God is seeking 'true worshippers.' *Jesus said to Samaritan woman, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain [Mt Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.'* (John 4:21-24)
 - a. It was this man – the doubly rejected of the society, a leper and a Samaritan, who ran back with all his might to worship God, falling on his face at Jesus' feet with a loud cry. He sought to worship God with gratitude uncontainable. The joy of rejoining his family could wait, but his gratitude to God couldn't wait. If we do not give thanks quickly, we usually don't do it at all. Out of the ten, who was the true worshipper?
 - b. *'Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.'* (v19) All ten had the faith to be made well, but this Samaritan man had greater faith than just for physical healing. The root word for healing in Greek 'sozo' is 'salvation'. Jesus' word to the man here is, 'Your faith has *saved* [perfect tense] you.' Something far more permanent than physical healing took place in the man.

Jesus uses this phrase on special occasions in Luke. (C.f. the woman wiping his feet with her tears - 7:50; the woman healed from bleeding - 8:48; the man healed of blindness - 18:42)

D. Two Kinds of Believers

We all want to be the kind of believers who glorifies God and God loves to work with. What kind of believers glorifies God? And what is the kind of worship God seeks from us?

1. We see the kind of believers, which we ought to grow out of.
 - They cause scandals of faith to others, and they do not forgive easily.
 - They pray, 'Lord increase our faith so that we can do more spectacular things for you.' But they seldom exercise the faith they already have in little things.
 - They serve, but they want special acknowledgment for what they have done.
 - And when the Lord answers their prayer, they run away enjoying the blessing and forget the Blessor.
2. We see another kind of believers, which we need to grow up into.
 - They watch their lives, so they do not become a stumbling block to others.
 - They take the trouble to confront sin in a brother in a costly way and forgive him rather than bearing grudges.
 - They may or may not have spectacular faith, but they seek to exercise the faith they do have by taking action in little things, so their faith grows in time.
 - They are free from both the criticism and the praises of people because they know they are serving the Lord not men, and they see it as their humble duty and sacred privilege.
 - Most of all they are grateful people. They see the kindness of God in all things, big and small. Each time they experience God's mercy, they run to God to thank Him and worship Him.

E. Reflection

1. Jesus warned us that it is a very serious matter to hurt God's children in such a way that they falter in their relationship with God. Are you guilty of it in any way?
2. Do you think perhaps God owes you a favour for the 'service' you have rendered for Him or the 'good life' you have lived?

Or do you see that as God's servant, the service you have given Him or the good life you have lived, are no more than your humble duty and sacred privilege?
3. Do you take time out to pray, perhaps even to fast, to express your thankfulness to the Lord? Or do you only pray when you need His help, with even fasting and shouting to get His attention?