

Luke's Gospel: Instructions for His disciples & the ten lepers Luke 17:1-19

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Have you ever had one of those occasions where you are being given instructions on something, but the person telling you has not got enough time to tell you everything properly? It usually ends up being a mass of statements and things to remember that come at you far too quickly. Or perhaps you have asked someone for directions and they just rattle off the various turnings and landmarks, expecting you to follow. The most awkward thing about such directions is often you are still working out the first bit while the rest carries on around you. It is sometimes difficult in such circumstances to work out whether the fault lies with the giver or the receiver of the information. Nevertheless, what usually happens is that the person hearing these things is left somewhat confused.

Sometimes you get the impression that the Gospel record tells us of such occurrences for the Lord Jesus. His instructions were well worth giving out and being listened to! But you could almost get the sense that He was pressed for time to pass on His knowledge to the disciples and those who followed Him. Worse still is that His listeners didn't understand half of the things that He was saying. I don't actually think that the Lord Jesus rushed things when He was speaking, it is just that the Gospels are packed with so much it just seems like that. However, I do think that the disciples struggled to understand. It would probably have been just the same if the Lord had been with them for thirty years instead of three years.

Our passage today is very much like this. We are picking up, from our run through Luke's Gospel, at chapter 17 and we only cover nineteen verses. However, in these nineteen verses we cover five different topics, including a short event with the ten lepers. As there are five lessons to take from this, I thought I would just go through each one, looking at the verses, before a final thought on the overall picture we gain from these things. The breakdown of the topics and their verses seem to follow this path:

- Lessons on offences – verses one and two
- Lessons on forgiveness – verses three and four
- Lessons on faith – verses five and six
- Lessons on service – verses seven to ten
- Lessons on thankfulness – verses eleven to nineteen

So, without further delay, let us take up the first lesson that we gain from our passage regarding giving offences. The first two verses state:

"Then He said to the disciples, 'It is impossible that no offences should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! 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.'"

The first point that is worth making is regarding the word offences. The term stumbling block provides us with a better insight to what the Lord Jesus was actually considering. This is an important contrast to make as we could think that these verses give us an excuse to say that we should not talk about the more controversial things in the Bible as they may offend people. This is an increased problem as the Gospel message of salvation is in itself offensive to people because it highlights their true nature.

Stating that this word is stumbling block rather than offence helps us understand the true purpose of this lesson. Here the Lord Jesus is considering those things where our behaviour and actions stray from the lives that we should be living, causing others to be upset, disappointed and discouraged. This is given with a particular emphasis on the impact on those weaker Christians.

Another two key points can also be taken from these verses. The first is that the natural tendency of mankind is to think that these things are inevitable. Isaiah 64 verse 6 contains the well-known statement "and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags." Seeing as this is our state for the good things we do naturally, it is not surprising that actions will occur where we cause problems for others. There will be times when we allow our nature to come through or we forget our responsibilities which can be in terms of how we behave or with regard to the work that we undertake for Christ. The consequences of such occurrences will therefore be that others who may look to us for example, or who are encouraged by our standard of living for Jesus, will be impacted by such failures.

The second point in these verses is to see the seriousness of such failings, or stumbling blocks. This is not a sweep under the carpet moment or something where we can just state that it will be all right. The Lord Jesus puts it in the proper place and shows God's view of these things. How often we may have heard statements such as 'it's just the way that they are' or 'they don't mean anything by it.' These may be reasons for actions, but they are not acceptable excuses in the eyes of God. We must therefore be mindful to avoid causing such stumbling blocks, and to repent and seek forgiveness should we fail in this way.

This leads nicely to the next lesson which covers the expectation for forgiveness for those that belong to Christ. Verses three and four state:

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

There are again two key points brought out here. The first is how we should deal with being wronged. The drive here is to facilitate forgiveness. The believers' aim when they have been wronged should be to restore the relationship between them and the other person who has done this action. And this should be done as quickly as possible. There is no hint here of waiting until the other makes the first move. The instructions of the Lord are to 'take heed of yourselves' and nobody else. Naturally the forgiveness follows repentance, but the point here is for us to actively seek this rather than wait for it to arrive.

This instruction is in such contrast with the world that we live in. We are so apt to either brood over things or seek retribution. Before we know it, we are telling others of what has happened, gaining allies against the person, seeking sympathy and support from as many as possible in order to help us feel righteous as the wounded party. Alas, in doing such things we can quickly become gossips and ourselves need forgiveness!

Seeking retribution is an increasingly popular theme in our society. If you were to look at the current films and television programmes, there would be a good number of them which include some sort of story where someone gets payback for the actions that someone else has done. This payback can often be much more severe than the original thing that they had to suffer from. Often there is a line of thinking that suggests that if someone does something that is not right, then you can do whatever you want to settle the score. Sadly, we see this in everyday life at all levels of our society.

However, in these verses we have a reminder that these responses are not to be normal amongst believers. We are not to go to others, just to the one concerned in the event. We are also not to get even and administer some level of our own justice. If we looked at this rationally, we would quickly see that this course of action being presented by the Lord Jesus is the most efficient and least damaging way to deal with such problems.

The second point in these two verses moves on to give us guidance on our willingness to forgive others. We have the reminder here of the right attitude towards forgiveness. We are being aligned to God's way of thinking here rather than the way we would naturally forgive. Our forgiveness can be with conditions where we require some corrective action or keep in mind previous performance. But this is not what is put forward here for our pattern. We should be most thankful of this because it is the way God deals with us. He forgives us freely when we come to Him in repentance, no matter how often that may be. Our forgiveness is certainly not conditional on our future or past performance. Our attitude to forgiving others should look to follow this divine pattern as we have benefitted ourselves so wonderfully from it.

These may well be well known passages for many of us, but I am thankful that I have had the need to study them in more depth while I have been putting this talk together. When we look at familiar passages there is a tendency to think we know it and have taken it on board, when in fact we have missed how incredible and challenging it really is. Our next two verses, five and six, bring that point out as the apostles were clearly impressed with what they had just heard.

"And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.""

The disciples clearly felt that this was an incredibly difficult set of things they were being asked to do and were struggling with how they might achieve this. This request for greater faith was not some whim as the answer from the Lord would not make much sense. It is clear they struggled to see how they may live up to these expectations. If we summarise what is being asked, it is easy to see why. Don't cause any kind of problem to other believers even though you are likely to do so, but if you do the consequences are dire. If anyone does it to you though, you should look to obtain their forgiveness even if you have to do it all day long. This flies in the face of the way the world works and our natural tendencies.

We, like the disciples, should see the real challenge of these instructions and lessons from the Lord. They are by no means easy, yet it is not presented as a target or some higher level of Christian living which can only be met by a select group of devout persons. Thankfully the answer from Jesus gives us the solution to this problem and that solution is through faith. The statement of the Lord is effectively saying that faith overcomes obstacles that may seem impossible. It is also not a great deal of faith that is required since such a great and impossible act only requires the amount represented by a mustard seed. The drive of this lesson is for us to lean on our faith in God to guide and control our lives, rather than our own strength. Such a course of action will enable us to succeed in carrying out these lessons in our daily lives.

As we move towards the fourth lesson regarding service, we now touch on one of the greatest challenges for most Christians. This challenge is regarding how much we give in serving God in our lives. How easy it is for us to leave service to people who seem to be good at it or are eager to take up such things. We could list off those famous names like Dwight L Moody, Charles Spurgeon, Warren Wiersbe and Billy Graham. We marvel at their devotion to service and wonder how they can do such things. We may even regret that we have not chosen to go into such things like this. I admit that there is a possibility of doing a disservice to many faithful believers who may just not be as famous for one reason or another. But the reality is that the vast majority of us struggle in giving our time to God.

Many church organisations are also geared towards this where people lead from the front and we can do as much or as little as we choose. Many listening or reading this may feel I am asking too

much. After all, we have our lives to live as well as the responsibilities that we have. This is very true, but nevertheless this passage is before us.

"And which of you, having a servant ploughing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat?' But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?' 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 those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

If we recap on the scene, Jesus has been telling the disciples some challenging lessons. They are then concerned that they will not be able to achieve this because it is required all of the time. They are given the guidance from the Lord that faith provides them with the strength they need for such a task. The natural question would then be to say, is it really necessary all of the time? Is it not enough to do it a bit or at least to try to remember to do it when it might come up? These verses therefore answer this question and put our service for God into perspective.

What a perspective it is! The first striking point that comes to my mind is that anything we do for the Lord is reasonable and our duty. Should we revere some of these well-known Christians that everybody has heard of? According to this passage not at all, they can be an example, but they are only doing what is expected and reasonable. Therefore, they are not to be seen as an ideal that is not attainable.

Here are some other points that I think come out from these few verses:

- We can never assume that we have done enough already
- We can't put it off to another time as the work needs to be done now
- Our service is not doing God any favours so we should not feel He owes us for our efforts.

I don't wish to go into more detail on these things because they are for us all to consider personally, in the circumstances that we are in. But these verses are a challenge to each of us not only in terms of what we do, but how we think about our service to God. Perhaps it suffices to say that it is good to be mindful of such verses when we are thinking about what we will spend our time on.

We can now move onto our final few verses. Here we move from the direct teaching of the Lord to an event that continues to give us helpful lessons. Verses 11 to 19 read:

"Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" So when He saw them, He said to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. So Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And He said to him, "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.""

As I am sure we are all aware, leprosy was a disease which caused the sufferers to be outcasts of society. The way Jesus deals with lepers in the Bible is a wonderful picture of His salvation work. He goes to those for whom society can do nothing, those who are desperately in need with no hope of recovery. He goes to where they are and heals them. We like them are deep in the mire of sin and failure, being outcasts from a holy and righteous God. But Jesus came to where we were and gave His life to heal the rift that no other could heal. Once accomplished, it is a complete and

final remedy to the problem. It is wonderful how the scriptures point so frequently towards the saving work of Jesus as the primary subject to consider.

But in the midst of this there is a really important point that is brought out by the Lord Jesus in the last few statements. I have called this section lessons in thankfulness but there are perhaps other ways this could be titled because there is a distinct lack of thankfulness shown. The statement from Jesus is that there was only one who had returned to give glory to God. All of this is linked to recognising the work and person of the Lord Jesus. I have three points to make regarding this aspect of thankfulness.

The first point I have is to recognise the difference between us and God. The people in this story seem to be more relieved than thankful. They have a bit of an appreciation of who Jesus is because they ask and expect that He can do something about their predicament. However, once it was granted there was no further desire to have the Lord Jesus influence their lives. This is so indicative of our society, as it ever has been. How much of the world prayed to God during the second world war? Many prayers were answered when that terrible war came to an end. However, seventy years or so on from that time and we see a country that would rather God not be mentioned in its everyday dealings. With individuals, this is also a problem as many people complain that God has forgotten them when things are not going well. But whilst things are going well for them they have no thought of God and what He would like them to do.

My second thought is that knowledge of God is no guarantee for knowing God. The nine who did not return were part of the Jewish nation. They should have known that the one they were dealing with was, at the very least, from God. They were those who would have been taught about God's ways, yet they only thought of the rituals that they needed to undertake to allow them to go back to their old lives. Only the foreigner, who would have not had as good an understanding of the ways of God, appreciated the greatness of what had happened. He also saw how great the person was who had done it for him.

Thirdly, this is a helpful reminder that God is looking for a response from us. It is not enough to have a thought that there is a God. Often God is only considered in the bad times as some sort of refuge. I am not denying that He is that, but we know from scripture that He is seeking people to worship Him. A sobering thought from this is that if Jesus was so concerned that people did not give glory to God in response to this occurrence, how much more will God not be happy when people fail to respond to His salvation, which cost the life of Jesus! All these points hopefully stir us up to realise how much we should look to be thankful for what we have been given.

As I approach the end of this talk, finishing the thoughts I had on the lessons from these verses, there is a further aspect that came to my mind as I considered them. When you take them as a whole, they paint a nice picture of development on a Christian's walk with God. We start off with the idea that we have offended God with our failure to live a life pleasing to Him. But He offers forgiveness if we repent. Our faith in Him allows us to be forgiven and then we are free to live a life of service to Him. All of this is wrapped up in thankfulness for all that He has done for us.

I said earlier that the Bible is always pointing towards the work of the Lord Jesus, and here in amongst all of the lessons for the disciples we can trace a little progression of salvation. This provides a nice way for me to finish with this reminder of the great salvation that we have through our Lord Jesus Christ. If we ever want a reason for why we need to look at improving our walk with Him, or if we need to be reminded why more effort is needed, looking back to our conversion moment is that source. May we all like the apostle Paul have that mindset which would say to the One who has saved us 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' (Acts 9 v 6)

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Luke's Gospel; Instructions for His Disciples and the ten lepers, talk number T1146.

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