

Luke 17:1-19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 17 verses 1 to 19. The apostle said to the Lord, And the Lord said, On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee, and as he entered a village he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying,

Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. When he saw them he said to them, Go and show yourselves to the priests. And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks.

Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?

And he said to him, Rise and go your way. Your faith has made you well. Moving into Luke chapter 17, we still see Jesus moving between teaching and addressing the Pharisees and the scribes, and then teaching and addressing his disciples and the apostles.

Temptations will come. Part of the reality of a sinful world is that people will be caused to stumble by various things. However, to be the cause of this is a very serious matter.

[2 : 2 1] We must be uncompromising in dealing with anything that might be an obstacle to the weak. Dealing radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves, but others from stumbling.

They must not follow the example of the scribes and the Pharisees and put obstacles in the way of little ones trying to enter the kingdom. Jesus refers to stumbling blocks or offenses in this chapter. Jesus has just been challenging the unfaithfulness of the religious teachers. And the importance of faithfulness in teachers is especially important, because teachers can so easily cause people who are vulnerable and weak, and people who can easily be led astray, to sin.

The consequences of this are most severe. Jesus uses an image that is later on used in Revelation chapter 18 verse 21, with reference to Babylon the Great. Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.

We must be vigilant. We must pay attention to ourselves. When someone sins against us, we must deal with it in the light of brotherhood. We have to deal with our brothers. If a brother sins against us, we can't just let it fester.

[3 : 3 5] In families we have to relate to each other, and the body of Christ should be the same. There is an imperative to uphold peace between us, and to heal wounds. We confront each other so that we will sort out things swiftly.

And forgiveness does not rule out confrontation and rebuke. Rather, it requires a certain sort of confrontation. Some people have the false impression that forgiveness is pretending that nothing happened, just smoothing over something and not saying anything about it.

But forgiveness requires telling the truth about what has been done. Implicit and often explicit in receiving forgiveness is acknowledging what you have done, the wrong that you have committed. And someone who will not admit the wrong that they have committed cannot accept forgiveness. However, forgiveness should be ready and not grudging. Nor is there a three strikes on your out policy as regards our forgiveness.

We should always be swift and ready to forgive. Much as God has forgiven us, so we should extend forgiveness to others. Cain may have been avenged sevenfold, but we forgive sevenfold.

[4 : 3 7] Jesus saying about the mustard seed and moving the mulberry tree, contrasts the small seed, the smallest of all seeds, and the great tree, the mulberry tree that would be incredibly difficult to remove.

Jesus has already used the mustard tree and the mustard seed as a symbol for the kingdom. Here he seems to be drawing attention once more to the smallness of the seed, but working with different aspects of the imagery.

The fig mulberry tree could perhaps be seen as an image of Israel. It's to be planted in the sea like the millstone. Once again, it might be a reference to Jerusalem being thrown into the realm of the Gentiles.

If Jesus' disciples have the smallest seed of kingdom faith, with the mustard seed, they could bring about God's judgment upon Israel. That is not a reading I'll put much weight upon, but it's a possibility.

In verses 7-10, Jesus speaks of the duty of the servant and the impossibility of gaining merit with God by our actions. This saying must be read against the background of Jesus' statement in chapter 12, verse 37.

[5 : 38] There God does the unexpected action, the thing that's unthinkable in this context, but it's not something that has been merited by the faithfulness of the servants. The point that's being made here is that our obedience is simply our duty, not something that will win us any merit or reward.

What we receive is purely an expression of God's unmerited goodness. Our passage ends with a discussion of the leper being healed. The lepers were prevented from entering into the community of worshippers, and Jesus heals ten lepers.

The one Samaritan leper who returns to Jesus seems to recognise Jesus as the one to return to, to thank and as the site of the presence and worship of God. His faith is commended, and he alone seems to have a faith that appreciates what God is doing in Jesus.

Luke sometimes repeats elements, recalling details of the story earlier on, and maybe encouraging us to juxtapose certain things or compare or relate things.

We've already seen this a few verses earlier in the description of the master and the servants, recalling chapter 12, verse 37. Here we have a good Samaritan. We also have the one in ten that returns, perhaps reminiscent of the one in ten coins.

[6 : 50] A foreign leper being healed might also remind us of Naaman the Syrian, who has already been referenced in chapter 4. The Samaritan leper's response is not merely to praise God, but to recognise the role that Jesus plays as an agent of God's kingdom.

Not just in the Gospels, Luke pays a lot of attention to Samaritans, in ways that outside of John chapter 4, the other Gospels generally don't. Among other things, I think this leads us up to the book of Acts, and the mission to the Samaritans.

As the Gospel goes from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth, Samaria and Israel being joined together, it's the joining together of a divided kingdom, in a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

A question to consider. Can you see a connection between the teaching regarding temptations to sin, and the teaching regarding forgiveness?