

JESUS LOVES CHILDREN

Luke 17:1-10

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

October 2, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 17, verses 1 through 10. In this gospel lesson, we see the great love Jesus has for children. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 17, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² 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. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ 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."

⁷ "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? ⁸ Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.' "

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this passage, we see one thing that Jesus loves and one thing that Jesus hates. And, often times, love and hate are connected to each other. If you love something, you might hate anything that threatens the thing you love. And in those few instances where hate is actually justified, that is certainly the case. We hate the thing that threatens the object of our love. So in this passage, we see one thing that Jesus loves, and one thing that Jesus hates.

Jesus loves children, and he hates sin, especially sin that harms children. There are a few places in the gospels where Jesus demonstrates a special love for children. This is one of those places. We'll read another one in a few more weeks, when some people try to bring infants to Jesus. The disciples rebuked the people. I suppose they thought infants were a waste of Jesus' time. But Jesus rebuked the disciples, and he invited the people to bring their infants to him (Luke 18:15-17).

Jesus has a special love for children. In general, he has a special love for anyone who is weak, vulnerable, or oppressed. So we see in Jesus a special love for those who are sick, those who are poor, those who are burdened with guilt and shame, and, as we see in this passage, especially children. And we should take a cue from Jesus so that we will love the same people he loves. In this passage we see his great love for children.

Children are weak and vulnerable. Grownups need to understand this. We can see this pretty clearly by their physical size. But we should see that it's not just physical. It's also mental and spiritual. If anything, children are more vulnerable mentally and spiritually, and we don't see this quite as clearly. Sometimes I hear people say that children are resilient. I don't know why people say that, because it's completely false. I suppose grownups say that because we're selfish, and sometimes we make decisions that harm our children, but we want to pretend that it won't harm them, so we say that children are resilient. But they're not.

Children might heal faster from physical wounds. Maybe that's where we get this idea. But their minds and their spirits are not resilient. It's kind of the opposite of the way it is for grownups. If a child gets hurt physically, like if a little girl breaks her arm, she probably cries a lot more than a grownup does. But she also heals faster. But if a child is wounded mentally or spiritually, that may never heal. But as we get older, things shift. Our physical injuries heal more slowly, while we become more resilient to wounds on our mind and spirit. But children are especially vulnerable mentally and spiritually, because those wounds don't heal the same way physical wounds do. So if a child is abused, in most cases, their bodies heal. But it's their mind and their spirit that suffers a permanent wound. Childhood is, by far, the most vulnerable stage of a person's life.

And that is why Jesus loves them. Jesus' love for people is always based on their need. It's never based on how virtuous we are or how attractive we are. Jesus loves us because we need his love. It's kind of the opposite of the reasons we love. We love people who are attractive in some way. It might be their physical appearance, their personality, their social status, their financial status, or anything that can benefit us. So we often love people who don't really need our love, but we want to get something from them. We love for *selfish* reasons. But Jesus' love is different. He loves for *selfless* reasons. He loves people who have nothing to give to him, but who need everything from him.

And that's why Jesus loves children. They need his love. In some ways, we also love children because they need our love, but it's not purely selfless like God's love. We find children to be loveable, at least most of the time. To us, children are loveable because they're cute, and, from a human perspective, they're innocent. They haven't done all the wicked things we've done. They're adorable, and that motivates us to love them. But Jesus is not motivated by their cuteness. If anything, he made them cute in order to motivate us to love and protect them. Their cuteness inspires us to love them. But that's not why Jesus loves them. Jesus loves them because they need it.

One of the ways Jesus loves children is by issuing a really, really harsh warning to grownups. **“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”** (17:1-2).

This is a little bit of a tricky passage to translate, and the English translation doesn't really do it justice. It's not a bad translation. But this is one of those rare places where English can't quite grasp the full meaning of Jesus' words. It doesn't really say, **“Temptations to sin are sure to come.”** It's more like, **“Stumbling blocks are sure to come.”** But then we have to explain what Jesus means by “stumbling block.”

The Greek word is σκάνδαλον (*scandalon*). It's different than the normal word for sin. In verses 3 and 4, Jesus uses the normal word for sin. But in verses 1 and 2, he uses a different

word, because he's talking about something else. I don't teach you a lot of Greek words, but you might be able recognize what English word comes from the Greek word σκάνδαλον. It's the word "scandal." But we don't really use the word "scandal" the way it was meant to be used. When Jesus used the word, he meant something that causes another person to stumble or fall into unbelief. Today when talk about a scandal, it's more like embarrassing celebrity gossip or a political thing that just gives the other party an opportunity to complain.

A truer example would be a church scandal, where a pastor or another trusted person does something that causes members of the church to not just leave the congregation, but to abandon the faith altogether. That would be the kind of scandal Jesus is talking about. A scandal is something that causes a Christian to lose faith. So a scandal in the church is not just a sin that disgraces the pastor, but it especially includes false teaching that would lead people away from the true faith. We don't usually call that a "scandal," but it is in the truest sense of the word, and those scandals are much more common. If a pastor stops preaching the gospel, and all he preaches is commandments, that would be a scandal, because it causes people to think that Christianity is just about following certain rules. That pushes out faith, and it causes people to stumble or fall into unbelief. Or if a pastor stops talking about sin, so that people forget they need forgiveness, that would be another scandal. Or if he denies any of the historical claims of Christianity, like the resurrection of Jesus or the virgin birth, that would be a scandal.

So a scandal is anything that causes a Christian to stumble into unbelief. With that in mind, listen again to Jesus' warning: **"Scandals 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 be scandalized."**

Jesus' concern is not so much that someone would cause a child to commit one individual sin. Parents cause their children to sin all the time. I have little kids, and I have learned that if I give them a piece of cake after supper, they lose control and commit all sorts of sins. But I keep buying cakes. And sometimes parents exasperate their children. When a kid is being defiant, I might respond with a harsh word, and it makes their behavior worse. The kid sins, but it's really my fault. Every parent has done this to their children. Whether intentional or not, we cause our children to commit sins. And that's bad, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here. To scandalize a child means to **"cause one of these little ones to stumble into unbelief."**

And that's why Jesus' warning is so harsh. **"It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea."** That's what mobsters call "sleeping with the fishes," or at least they do in the movies. It sounds kind of strange to hear Jesus talking like a mob boss, but he's right. It would be better to die than to lead a child of God away from the faith, because that would have eternal consequences.

We're all in love with this world. If Jesus' statement sounds harsh or extreme, it's because we're in love with this world instead of the world to come. There is nothing worse that could happen to you than you lose your faith in the one true God and, therefore, lose your place in his new creation. And there is nothing worse you can do to another Christian than cause them to fall away from the true faith, because then you would rob them of their place in God's new creation. May God preserve us from this. If I were about to do something that would cause a fellow Christian to fall away from the faith, especially a child, may God strike me dead before I commit that sin. It would be better for that child, and it would be better for me at the judgment, if I die before I do such a thing.

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Now we all sin. And when you hear me say that, don't think, "Okay, so my sin isn't that bad, because everybody else sins." Nope. Don't worry about everyone else. Jesus says, "**Pay attention to yourselves**" (17:3). When I say, "We all sin," you should think to yourself, "I sin." And we sin the most against the people we are closest to. If you get married, your husband or wife becomes the one person in the world that you sin against the most. And that is because you're not just close to that person, but you are one flesh with that person. Everything you do affects them. And if you have children, those children become the next people on that list. And it's not just because you're close to them, but it's because they depend on you. The most damaging sins are the ones we commit against the people who depend on us.

When I was a child, I probably thought that children sin more against their parents than parents do against their children. After all, the Fourth Commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother." And in our house, we had rules. And it was almost always us children who broke the rules. My parents almost never did anything wrong. So I thought that children sin more against their parents than parents do against their children. Then I became a dad, and I learned that I had it all backward. Parents sin against their children far worse than children do against their parents. And I don't mean that parents do more naughty things. Children definitely do more naughty things. But often times, when they do something naughty, it's really my fault. And, more importantly, I see that their sins don't really harm me. But my sins do harm them. When they grow up, their sins might hurt me, but not when they're little. That's because they depend on me, not the other way around. They don't exist for my sake. I don't need anything from them. I'm not entitled to anything from them. But they are entitled to things from me. They do need things from me. I exist for their sake.

God created the family for the benefit of children. There is no higher calling in this life than to be a mother or a father. Mothers and fathers reveal the nature of God to their children. Now parents should teach the faith to their children using words. That's part of the calling. But parents also teach the faith to their children by demonstrating the character of God. And this doesn't work for anyone else. It only works for parents, because parents are the supreme authority to their children. Parents demonstrate the character of God to their children by being present, by providing for them, protecting them, loving them, and forgiving them. By doing this, they reveal the gracious character of God. But when parents are absent or abusive, and this is especially true for fathers, they make it hard for their children to believe in a gracious heavenly Father. And if that's you, I cannot emphasize enough that your heavenly Father is different. Parents can have the greatest positive impact on a person's life, or the worst negative impact. No one can help us more or hurt us more than our parents.

Bad parents sin against their children.

Good parents sin against their children and confess their sin to their children. There are other differences. But this is one of the things my father taught me. And this is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to their children. When you sin against them, and you do, confess your sin to them. Children naturally hold their parents in some kind of hero status, and it can be tempting to try to keep up that appearance, but sooner or later, your children are going to figure out who you really are, and that might scandalize them. But when you confess your sin to them, you give them a great gift. You teach them humility. And you teach them that humility is part of strength. You teach them that they can confess their sin without being destroyed. And you show them what it looks like to trust not in your own righteousness, but in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Good parents sin against their children and confess their sin to their children. Do it when you sin

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against them. Do it the same day. Calm down. Take a breath. And say, “I was wrong. Can you forgive me?” Maybe you’re long overdue. Your kids might be grown up. And they might be doing the same thing to their kids that you did to them. Pay the late fees. Go to them and confess all the sins you committed against them. And confess that it took you too long. This is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to their children.

And fall at the mercy of your Savior. Jesus commands forgiveness in this passage. That applies to everyone. It applies to parents, children, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, friends, and neighbors. But before it applies to any of us, it applies to Jesus. When he commands us to forgive, he practices what he preaches. He does not command us to do anything here that he has not already done perfectly and a billion times more. He commands us to forgive, because he has forgiven us.

Forgiveness means bearing the cost for what someone else did. It means not seeking justice or payback. You have sinned against God. You have broken his rules. You have harmed other people whom he loves. And God forgives you. He has paid the cost for that. Jesus’ death on the cross paid the cost. He suffered all the wrath of God for that. God bore the cost for everything we have done and everything we are. He does not seek justice or payback. Every sin that parents commit against their children is paid for by Jesus’ blood. Every sin that children commit against their parents is paid for by Jesus’ blood. All of your sin is paid for by Jesus’ blood. And your sins are forgiven. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.