JESUS LOVES HIS CHILDREN

Luke 17:1-10
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)
October 5, 2025
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND
Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 17, verses 1 through 10. 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."
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> **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.' "

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

I'm going to focus on the first four verses of this reading.

Jesus loves his children; therefore, he gives stern instructions to his disciples, so that they will properly care for his children.

After speaking to the Pharisees in the end of chapter 16, Jesus now turns to speak to his disciples. And this group of disciples includes more than just the twelve apostles. But there were seventy or seventy-two others who were numbered among his disciples. This means that Jesus' instructions are not merely for his apostles, which was a special office to teach with the full authority of Jesus, but his instructions are for every disciple that cares for Jesus' children. So, in the congregation, this especially includes pastors, deacons, and all teachers. In the family, it includes parents and, in many places, grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Jesus loves his children. And here he gives stern instructions to any who would care for his children.

There's a fine line between love and anger. Sometimes they can be opposite sides of the same coin. Parents become angry when something threatens or harms their children. It's possible for that anger to become exaggerated, so that a protective parent acts out with excessive vengeance. But when something threatens or harms our children, it is right, even godly, to be angered by it. God is angered when his children are threatened or harmed. The Bible speaks of God being jealous for his children (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Joel 2:18; Zech. 1:14; 8:2). And by "jealous," it does not mean that he is emotionally insecure. There's a sinful kind of jealousy, which thinks about ourselves, and a righteous kind of jealousy, which thinks about the other. God is jealous for his children so that we would not be tempted away from him. He knows that to belong to him means life for us, but to be tempted away would mean death. That is why he is jealous for us. Jesus is jealous for you, and he is angered by anything that would threaten your soul.

We see Jesus' jealousy come out in this passage, where he says regarding someone who may scandalize one of his children, "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea" (17:2). That sounds extreme, like something a mafia boss would do. But when we understand the stakes, it is actually quite reasonable. It is better to die a physical death than to cause someone else to die for eternity.

The big question with this text is who Jesus means by "these little ones" (17:2). Matthew and Mark record the same saying, and in both accounts, just a few verses before this, Jesus actually picks up a child in his arms (Matt. 18:2; Mark 10:36), so he may still be holding that child when he refers to "these little ones." But that doesn't mean Jesus is only speaking of little children, because Luke doesn't mention that child; therefore, it's not absolutely necessary to understand the meaning. So children are certainly a big part of what Jesus is talking about, but we should also understand it to include all of Jesus' children, regardless of size or age.

The other thing to recognize is how Jesus uses the word "scandal." Some translations render it as "temptations to sin" or "offences." I'll give you the Greek word, just because you will recognize it. It's σκάνδαλον (*scandalon*). It's obviously where we get our English word "scandal." Literally, it means a "stumbling block." But whatever word the translators choose, there's some explanation required. In English, we have a couple different kinds of scandals. There's the celebrity gossip kind, where we feel a twisted sense of glee or moral superiority when some famous person disgraces themselves. That's not the type of scandal Jesus is talking about. Then there is the other kind where someone says or does something that brings disrepute on their cause or organization. It could be someone we respected, but we suddenly feel like everything they ever said or did was a lie. In churches, a pastor or leader may scandalize his congregation when he has a moral failure. People may look at that, think of him as a hypocrite, and reject everything he ever taught, even if it was good. In this way, his failure could ultimately lead people to reject the Christian faith and be lost for eternity. He could also scandalize them through his teaching. It could even be a hidden scandal. He may teach something false, leading people to believe lies and be lost for eternity. Or a scandal could be something that comes from outside the Church and leads one of God's children away from him. They are stumbling blocks that would threaten our trust in Jesus. Most stumbling blocks probably come from the world, where the devil's lies abound.

The devil is a tempter. Every temptation, ultimately, comes from him. And we should understand what he intends to do by his temptation. The devil is crafty. He does not look like those silly Halloween costumes with red spandex and plastic horns. He is deceptive. He appears

more like a bearer of light. That's what the name "Lucifer" means. To Adam and Eve, he appeared to be giving them the light of how to become like God.

The devil is not really interested in getting you to commit one sin. His end goal is not to get you to cheat on your homework, say something mean to your spouse, or click on that link you know is bad. Those temptations are bad, and probably worse than we even realize. But the reason those temptations are dangerous is because that's not all the devil wants. His ultimate goal is to tempt you away from faith in Christ. So this word "scandal" means "a stumbling block that causes you to fall away from faith in Jesus." That is what the devil desires, and that is what he is always working toward. For the devil, it's never really about the individual sin. It's about what he can do with that sin. He wants you to love that sin more than the true God, so that you reject him. Or he wants you to become so entrapped in that sin that you start to think that God could never forgive you and you fall away in despair.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book about this called *The Screwtape Letters*. If you haven't read it, you should. It's one of his many classics. It's a series of fictional letters from an arch demon to his nephew about how to tempt a man away from the Christian faith. And the demonic advice is not, "See if you can get this guy to rob a gas station." It's more like, "Right now, you won't be able to stop him from going to church, but while he's there, make sure he pays attention to all the other people instead of the service. Make sure he notices someone's double chin or the ragged edges on someone's dress. If you can make him think that he is better than other Christians, that will be to our advantage." It's crafty stuff like that.

One of the common temptations today is "authenticity." The world talks a lot about "authenticity." And true authenticity is good. It means you're honest about who you are, and you don't try to cover up your faults. It means that you don't say to someone, "I'll pray for you," when, in the back of your mind, you know that you probably won't. Authenticity is saying, "My prayer life is kind of weak, but when I think of it, I will pray for you." That's authentic, and it's good. In this way, authenticity is similar to honesty and integrity.

But the world talks about being true to your "authentic self," and that is something else. They mean that you disregard everyone else's expectations, including God's, and you find your innermost values and desires, and you lean in to them, whatever they might be. It's based on the devilish idea that the heart of man is good, or, at least, not bad, because in this way of thinking, nothing is judged as bad or good. It is certainly not based on the fundamental biblical teaching that the heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9) and the source of all kinds of evil (Matt. 15:18-19; Mark 7:20-21).

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Really? That's the greatest accomplishment? I can think of a few people who accomplished something more. And I really hope my life amounts to more than people saying of me, "He acted like himself."

Go watch *Saving Private Ryan* or *Band of Brothers*. Read a history of the Reformation or Christian martyrs. Compare the stories of those men and women to the philosophy of Emerson. They lived for something, and it wasn't themselves. Their lives had meaning. For many of them, their deaths had meaning.

Maybe someone doesn't feel like they are really fit to be monogamous. What they're really feeling is the sin of lust. The world says, "That's okay; don't try to be something you're not. That would just be inauthentic. Lean in to it with pride and be who you are." They stick the word "authentic" on it when they really mean "selfish." We're tempted to think this way so that when

someone accuses us, or, more often, when our conscience accuses us, we can simply say, "I'm just being true to my authentic self. At least I'm honest about who I am." This is just a thinly veiled rebranding of old-fashioned selfishness. The devil's temptations don't have to be very clever, because he knows what we want. We want an excuse to be selfish.

The devil's temptations are not really behavioral; they are theological. He's not trying to get you to just do one bad thing, because your sin does not separate you from God anymore. Even the devil knows that. Jesus paid for all sins and reconciled us to God. So the devil is trying to get you to think wrongly about yourself and, ultimately, about God, so that you will not trust him. He can't destroy the relationship on God's end, so he targets your end. So with this heresy of authenticity, the devil wants people to think the church is unaccepting and hypocritical. We see people committing sin or harming their bodies. And we say, "You should not do that. You're harming yourself, or you're harming other people, or you're causing pain, and you're going to regret these things." And the devil tempts them to think that the Church is just not accepting them for who they really are. But what we really want is for all people to repent, to experience the freedom of the forgiveness of sins, and to find true joy in living according to God's will. The devil takes the sinful desires of the heart and makes them look good, while he makes the gracious will of God look repressive and evil.

Such scandals or temptations "are sure to come," says Jesus, "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). And, again, the word there is "scandal" or "stumbling block." A more literal translation would be, "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 scandalize one of these little ones." Jesus is not talking about provoking a person to one individual sin. I provoke my children to sin whenever I tease them just a little too much. That's not what Jesus means. He's talking about the person who scandalizes a Christian so that they fall away from the faith. When we understand that, we can see that the part about a millstone and the sea is actually quite reasonable.

I sometimes think about this in the context of being a pastor and a father. What if I were about to say or do something that would scandalize one of my children, so that they turn away from the Christian faith and never come back? I would rather die. I pray that God will strike me dead, rather than allow me to do such eternal harm to a precious soul, especially one of my own children. The most important thing a parent can do is teach their children to trust in Jesus. And the worst thing a parent can do is lead them away from Christ. Some people say, "I don't want to force religion on my kids." That's the stupidest thing ever. Parents force many good things on their children. We force them to eat. We force them to go to bed. We force them to bathe. We force them to learn. We pass down our values to them. We even pass down our favorite sports teams. Why would we not pass down eternal truth, and even force them to learn it? In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, the LORD commands the people, "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Give these things to your children and grandchildren. To withhold them is the scandal. Force them to know that Jesus is the Son of God who loves them unconditionally and forgives their sins without limit.

The goal of the devil's temptation is to either make us love sin so much that we reject God altogether, or to make us despair so deeply that we cannot fathom how God could forgive us. To

the first, we have a warning: that is the way of death. Turn away from it. And to the one who thinks their sin is too great for God's forgiveness, that could never be. Jesus knew your sin when he went to the cross. He knew all the sin of the world, and he did not leave any of it behind. Confess your sin and believe what God declares to you: you are forgiven; you are righteous for the sake of Jesus.

In verses 3 and 4, Jesus commands his disciples to forgive sins. In verse 3 it's all sins, not just the sins someone commits against you. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." This is God's forgiveness, not merely yours. We know, with certainty, that it is God's will to forgive all sinners, so we should never hesitate to proclaim God's forgiveness to all people. Verse 4 is more personal: "If he sins against you seven times in the day, and he turns seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Why? Because God forgives him, and God has already forgiven you of much.

The good and gracious will of God is to forgive sins. His will for our lives is that we would live according to his commandments, because his commandments are good and healthy for us. The devious will of the devil is to obscure all of this. Do not fall for his temptations, and do not cause any of God's children to fall into temptation. And if you do fall into any of his temptations, never fall for his lie that you are beyond the forgiveness of God. The blood of Jesus covers all sins. Before he even took up his cross, he knew every sin. Jesus knew the sins you have committed. He knew the sins you are yet to commit. They are no surprise to him, and he has already paid for them. So repent. Confess your sin. And know that you are forgiven for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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