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**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE****Luke 17:1-10 | Kirsten Anonby****May 7, 2023**

Have you ever discovered that you're doing something that you really care about the wrong way?

I have. You know I was late to the game of parenting, which means I got to watch my closest friends parent for years before I got a hand at trying anything with offspring of my own. Two of my best friends have been committed homeschoolers for the past 20+ years, and as they were figuring out their educational philosophies, I was right there with them. Yes, I agreed with them, I want kids who aren't peer driven, who love Jesus and love to learn, and homeschooling is the best way to do that.

Eventually my husband I met, fell in love, married, and had three real live children. And because David is an agreeable sort of person and because I'm a persuasive sort of person, he agreed that we could homeschool our kids. And so, when the time was right, we began. It was a lot harder than I thought – much harder than I had dreamed when my best friends' daughter pranced out to meet me dressed up like Cleopatra. But I could do hard, so we kept at it, until the fall of 2020 when I started praying about working here.

I will tell you that hands down the hardest part of accepting this pastoral role was letting go of homeschooling. And it isn't because I so dearly loved homeschooling – it was because I was so convinced that I was right – I was so confident that the only way I could have kids who weren't peer driven, who loved to learn, and who loved Jesus, was to homeschool. So, to hear from Jesus that even though homeschooling was the best way for many other families – it wasn't the best way forward for us was disorienting, it took humility to accept, and it felt like a risk to reorient our lives.

It's difficult to acknowledge that you were wrong.

**About the Pharisees**

Today we are continuing in the Gospel of Luke, and we are at the end of a very long section where Jesus has been in conversation with two different groups in turns: the disciples, and a religious group called the Pharisees. Imagine Jesus in the centre with two different groups hovering around him – at some points he's addressing the Pharisees, and at other points he's

talking to his disciples, but the other group is always within earshot – always listening. And the topic of conversation is always at its core about what the Kingdom of God is like and how that Kingdom can be made a reality in the world.

Before we read our text for today I want to talk a little bit about the Pharisees. If you've been tracking with us for the past few weeks you might be sick and tired of hearing about them. But this is kind of the end of the road for the Pharisees. Up to this point in Luke they've have been hanging around a lot – Jesus even attended one of their dinner parties. But that ends after this section. Last week Reuben mentioned that the Pharisees, who loved money, sneered at Jesus in response to his story of the shrewd manager. That sneer indicates that the Pharisees have rejected Jesus' teaching -- they've made their choice. After this Jesus still refers to them, and when he gets to Jerusalem he engages with other Jewish teachers of the law – but the back and forth with the Pharisees is done.

So, as we look in the rear-view mirror at Jesus' interaction with this religious group, let's be sure to understand who they were and what their conflict with Jesus was all about.

First off, Jesus' primary adversary in the gospels is the Pharisees, but this is not because they were the most evil people in Judea. That honour might have gone to someone like Herod, or his wife, Herodias, who prompted her daughter to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter (not your average Sunday School story).

The Pharisees were a group of religious teachers who were trying to renew the religious life of the Jewish people through properly following the law. They were passionate about the coming of the Messiah – and were longing for a time when that Messiah would come to demonstrate God's favour on the Jewish people by throwing off the heavy weight of Roman oppression and re-establishing Israel as a nation of power and importance.

The way they were trying to do this was by faithfully following the law and calling the Jewish people to do so as well. They saw wealth as a sign of God's favour towards them, and were fully convinced that when Messiah came, they would be recognized and rewarded for their faithfulness.

All the Jewish people, including the disciples, would have known who the Pharisees were and what they were about. They would have known that they were seeking to renew and restore Israel to what it was meant to be –

and to call the Jewish people to follow the law, so that God would hear and answer their cry for help.

And then, along comes Jesus. Jesus, who teaches with authority, who heals and does miraculous signs. Jesus – who has a frustrating habit of pointing out to the Pharisees the parts of the law that they might have missed or conveniently ignored– Jesus – who has the audacity to say that to be one of God’s people is not about following the law, but about following him.

The reason why Jesus is always criticizing the Pharisees and telling his followers not to be like them is because they, like Jesus, were trying to bring about the Kingdom of God, but they weren’t going about it the right way. These conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees are heated insider debates: conflicting visions about how to accomplish the same goal.

The Pharisees are trying to follow the law so well so that God will once again show his favour, and will bring about the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus says “the Kingdom of God is already here because I am here. Follow me – let me show you what the Kingdom of God is like.”

That’s why Jesus tells so many parables in this section of Luke. Each one of these parables has an ending that would have completely surprised the original hearers. The Prodigal Son is fully forgiven and welcomed home. When the rich man and Lazarus both die, we’re surprised to find that the rich man’s wealth was not a sign of God’s favour, and that the poverty and sickness of Lazarus was not a sign of God’s judgement. Over and over again Jesus is pointing out to both the Pharisees and the disciples that the Kingdom of God is not what they had expected it to be.

And like me, the Pharisees found it difficult to acknowledge that they were wrong.

Understanding the Pharisees matters for our text today because the connective tissue in these ten verses is that Jesus is telling his followers what it means to be faithful, and is drawing out some key ways faithfulness will require them to act differently than the Pharisees.

#### **Luke 17:1-4**

If you look at the first two paragraphs, they’re all about how to rightfully treat people.

Jesus begins in the first paragraph with a warning not to cause “little ones” to stumble. This reference to “little ones” is not only referring to children, but would refer to anyone who is vulnerable in society – the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor. Since this teaching comes directly after the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, one would think of the poor beggar Lazarus, lying outside of the rich man’s gates – dying of hunger and covered in open sores all over his body.

Jesus doesn’t identify just what it would mean to cause one of these “little ones” to stumble, but in light of the story of the rich man and Lazarus one could certainly assume that it has something to do with looking out for the welfare of the people around us whose lives are hard. Jesus is making it clear that the welfare of the vulnerable and needy around us is our concern. Jesus’ overarching message is that we need to be actively engaged in bettering the lives of those who are vulnerable and needy. You can fill in the blanks in terms of who that would be in our world.

And what if we are actively engaged in making their lives harder than they already are? What if we are actively engaged in doing the opposite of what we are called to do? Well, Jesus tells his disciples that it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a 1500 kg millstone tied around their neck.

Jesus is calling his people to be people that work with him to alleviate suffering in the world. That is what it means to be faithful. The call is to value people more than wealth, and more than following the letter of the law (as the Pharisees did). Jesus is actually calling his followers to follow the heart of the law, which was to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.”

### **Luke 10:27**

Then Jesus goes on to talk about forgiveness. Remember that everyone in his hearing has only recently heard the shocking story of the Parable of the prodigal son. Jesus brings them back to this story by telling them to rebuke someone who sins against them, and if they repent they are to forgive them. And they are to repeat this process – NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES it happens. Jesus states clearly that, unlike the Pharisees who judged and scorned the broken and sinful who were crowding around Jesus, his followers are to offer forgiveness without limits or terms. Jesus’ people are to forgive like the Father who welcomes the prodigal home.

## Luke 17:5-6

After hearing this teaching and truly seeing the depth to which Jesus is calling them to love people, something clicks in the apostles, Jesus' 12 central followers. I can imagine that they realized what Jesus was asking, and saw within themselves their own inadequacy. And so they say to Jesus, their Lord, "Increase our faith!" A few things about this:

First off, I feel like this is of the disciples' better moments. I love that it was the depth of Jesus' call for them to actively love others that caused them to see their own inadequacy. They knew they needed help if they were to love people in this way. So they ask for help – and they come to the right person – Jesus.

They ask for Jesus to increase their faith, and probably the best way to read this is that they are asking to be made into more faithful people. We can sometimes as Christians start to think of faith almost as a possession – but the cry here is for a heart transformation that will allow them to be faithful to love in the way Jesus has called them to.

And what is Jesus response? He tells them that if they have faith – even a small amount of faith – that they could tell a mulberry tree to plant itself in the sea, and it would.

On first reading Jesus' response just sounds weird. What is he telling us here?

Well I don't think he is encouraging them to walk around commanding bushes to plant themselves in the ocean. As cool as might be to see all the blueberry bushes in the Fraser Valley go flying into the ocean, flying bushes doesn't really have much to do with Jesus' purposes in the world.

What does further Jesus' purposes in the world, though, is something just as miraculous as flying bushes or trees: the transformation of a person's heart to love the sinful and the needy. And that is Jesus' point.

He is telling them that even with a little bit of faith and trust in Him – their hearts can be changed. Jesus is able to give them the kind of love for the sinner, and for the vulnerable, that they need.

Or, as the Lord promised many years before through the prophet Ezekiel (36:26) 26 And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.

The people who can speak best to this kind of heart transformation are those who have served regularly with people in a vulnerable or broken place. Talk with people who meet regularly with women in our local prison, talk with people in our community who volunteer in ministries like the Gateway of Hope, or Nightshift. Talk with those who love and serve children, talk with care-givers. Ask them how Jesus has enlarged their hearts, how Jesus has deepened their love and compassion.

When we meet Jesus and give him our hearts – he does what Ezekiel says here: he gives us a new heart. And the more we step out in love for others, the deeper and larger our love grows, and the more fully we experience joy. Hopefully you caught that as listened to the stories the past few weeks about serving. That's why we celebrate serving as a community – serving others enlarges and deepens Jesus' heart in us.

But let the promise of that crazy flying mulberry tree sink in. A transformed heart is not something we build on our own. We can come to Jesus as our selfish broken selves – and as we step out and seek to love others, His Spirit makes the change in us.

### **Luke 17:7-10**

In the last section, Jesus talks about our roles as servants, in particular, Jesus is talking here about our role as God's servants.

It can be easy for us to misunderstand this section because we don't get master/slave relationships like Jesus' disciples would have. We might look at this passage and think "good grief, the servant doesn't even get a thank you! That's not very kind!"

The main point Jesus is making here is that when the servant does his duty, this doesn't place the master in his debt – doesn't obligate the master to reward him in some way. The term "thanks" in verse 9, would not have referred to simply a verbal expression of gratitude, but to the master having been placed in the servant's debt. Would the master owe the servant any kind of special privileges simply because they did their job? The obvious answer for the original hearers would have been "of course not!"

And yet, this is exactly what the Pharisees were expecting. The Pharisees felt that they deserved special honour and privileges because they had been faithful – they had fulfilled the law.

When I think about the pharisees, I think that they are simply doing what people have done since the dawn of human civilization – performing for the gods. Throughout the ages people have performed for the gods – appeasing them, gaining their favour and approval, impressing them by their faithfulness, their loyalty, their zeal. When left on our own without any direction this is the direction we go – we try to earn our way.

And I find that I have a bit of the god-performer in me, that part of me that looks for favour and approval from God. My way of going about it might be a bit more nuanced, but I can't deny that every once in a while there's a voice inside of me that wants to have earned a spot on God's elite squad. That wants to have felt that I've really something that means God really needs me. There's that little part of me that's crying out for Jesus to give me a medal.

The point Jesus is making is that no matter what we do, or how well we serve, God is never in our debt. No matter what we do we are always in the position of the servant – being faithful with the work we've been given by our master. This doesn't nullify the other images we are given by Jesus about who we are: we are his children, we are his friend, we are his bride. We are loved, we are chosen, we are intimately known, we are delighted in. But God doesn't owe us anything, no matter how well we've performed, no matter how hard we've worked. Everything Jesus has given us is a gift – none of it is earned.

This is why humility is really the only way for us to approach our life as Christians, and why any positioning for power in God's Kingdom is ludicrous – because we're all really servants. And Jesus is so much greater and holier, and more powerful and more glorious than us that we could never even touch him. The idea of Him ever owing us anything is comedic at best and blasphemous at its worst.

### **So how do we follow in the way Jesus has laid out for us?**

When I look at Jesus' way of living out the Kingdom of God, what I see as its distinctive feature is that it's all relational. It's all bound up in our relationship with Jesus and our relationships with one another. Every part of our faith is relational at the centre. The rules God gives us are relational at their heart. True holiness and goodness contain at their heart a love and delight of people.

If we look at following Jesus through a relational lens, we'll always hit the mark. We'll see that it's critical to care for the Lazarus's of this world – even if touching the beggar's open sores makes us unclean. We'll see that,

regardless of what a selfish idiot they've been in the past – a repentant heart is holy ground – and the only appropriate response is grace. We'll understand that the most important thing that we receive from Jesus is not an accolade for service, but intimacy.

I find that knowing the direction that Jesus is leading us – a relational direction, a humble direction, helps us to recognize his pastoral direction and voice in our lives. Know that following Jesus will always lead us further up and farther in to thinking less of ourselves and more of Jesus and the people we live with each day.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Have you ever had Jesus tell you that you needed to go about something a different way? What was that experience like?
- What do you think Jesus might mean when he talks about causing "little ones" to stumble? Who do you think are little ones in our world and how are we in danger of making their life harder?
- Chat a bit about your inner Pharisee – where do you see that cropping up in your heart?
- What do you think it means to see following Jesus as relational?