**The Teacher: Wrath to Wreath to Wraith**

Luke 17:1-10

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It was December of 2001, and I remember Nikki and I catching the bus downtown to a big theater in Vancouver where hundreds of super-fans crowded in to watch The Fellowship of the Ring on opening week. As the lights went down the crowd erupted in applause like I’ve never experienced at any other movie.

And then I remember a chilling air fill the theater as Frodo and his posy of halflings found themselves on Weathertop in the dark and encountering what must be some of the most terrifying bad guys of any movie – the Ringwraiths.

These nine hooded figures used to be glorious kings of Middle Earth but now have been reduced to mere shadows. They lurk in darkness, spreading fear like poison as they serve their evil master. But the scariest thing about a wraith is that we can become wraiths ourselves.

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Good morning. If you’ve been with us you know that we are walking through Luke and Jesus’ depiction of the good news that has the power to enable us to live abundantly right now and forever. And today we are in chapter 17. So if you’ve got a Bible open it up and follow along. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? We are going to pick it up in verse 1. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Luke 17:1-10]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

In all the Gospels, but particularly in Luke, there are a couple sections that appear to be a whole string of ideas thrown together. So right away that’s difficult. And then you couple that with chucking disciples into the sea tied to millstones and it kind of feels like this would be a good section to skip.

But as it turns out, this isn’t a whole string of different ideas – there is one thought here. And while it is difficult, it’s absolutely essential to embrace if we are going to follow Jesus. And we get the central idea in verses 3 and 4 where Jesus says “if your brother or sister sins again you seven times you must forgive.” Jesus is talking about forgiveness. And first He show us how big a thing forgiveness is – it’s bigger than you think. Then He gives us some tools to practice. And finally He fills us with the power to pull it off.[[1]](#footnote-1) And that’s where we’re going. We need this.

So let’s jump into verses 1 through 4 and how big a thing forgiveness is. Now Luke tells us right at the beginning that Jesus is talking to His disciples, and that’s important. What He’s saying is “If you want to follow Me this is for you.” And then He urges us not to give offense or take offense easily. So in verse 1 Jesus says:

“Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves.” (Luke 17:1-3)

So Jesus says, “Hey Christian, watch yourself because it’s easy to lead people into sin. People are looking at you to see what I look like. And when you are inconsistent people are going to see. So if you are gossiping or making promises you don’t keep your actions are going to cause these little ones – people with new or small faith – to stumble. So watch yourself. Don’t give people the wrong reason to be offended.

Now Jesus isn’t saying “never offend.” In fact the gospel is offensive. It says all people are sinners who need a Saviour. That’s offensive. But Jesus says, it’s one thing if people are offended by the gospel, and it’s another if people are kept from coming to Jesus because you and I are jerks. So watch yourself, don’t be a jerk.

Alright that’s the easy bit. Next Jesus gets to the meat of where He’s going. He says

“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.” (Luke 17:3-4)

Now there is a parallel here between Luke 17 and Matthew 18 – that’s the passage where Jesus talks about how to deal with sin in the church. First you go to the person who hurts you privately, then you bring a witness, and finally you bring it to the church.

And all this is hard, especially for Canadians because we know that in Canada if you hurt me I smile at you and shove it under the rug. Then I cut you down behind your back. But I do it sneaky-like so if I’m ever confronted, I can pretend to be confused because everything is fine. That’s how you deal with offence Canada style.

But Jesus says, “Hey Christian, If you’re going to follow Me you must forgive even if the person hurts you seven times. You must forgive.”

Now this is a big ask. And we know the disciples understood it was big because they respond “Lord, increase our faith.” What they’re saying is “We can’t do what You’re asking Jesus. It’s too big. Maybe a super Christian could pull that off. But not me. So if you want me to forgive You need to increase my faith.”

So how big is the whole forgiveness thing Jesus is talking about? What does Jesus mean when He says “If your brother sins against you seven times in a day and comes back repenting you must forgive.” That seems a bit ridiculous. Right?

Like when one of my kids kicks another in the shin, we make them say sorry. And we’ve got this fancy dance we enforce where they have to hug each while they do it. And no eye rolling or limp arm hug either. You’ve got to repent and mean it. And then the other person has got to say, “I forgive you.”

And occasionally we gets results. But if the offender turns around and kicks the shin six more times, that “I’m sorry” is going wear thin no matter how fancy a hug dance they do. Nobody sins against you seven times in a day and repents each time. So what’s up?

Well some numbers in Jewish tradition aren’t numbers. And seven is one of those numbers. So whenever seven gets mentioned in the Bible it rarely means one more than six. Instead it almost always means to completion or fullness. And that’s what Jesus is saying here.

So get this, Jesus doesn’t just mean forgive no matter how many times your brother sins – though that’s true – He really means forgive even when someone wrongs you as completely and fully as any person could possibly do. Forgive even then.

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So imagine the worst thing a person could do to you. This will be different for all of us. But just imagine something so terrible that nothing worse could possibly be done. And Jesus says if someone did that to you, you must forgive. This is how big the forgiveness is Jesus asks for.

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Wow! No wonder the disciples say “Increase our faith.” You’d have to be a super Christian to do that! Right? And yet Jesus says, “Yup. If they… repent, you must forgive.” It’s a huge ask.

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Okay, pause for a second. I think sometimes we look at the big commands of scripture and write them off as impossible. But if Jesus tells us to do something then we can do it. Jesus never says “If you want to be My disciple all you need to do is fly.” That’s not the kind of big ask Jesus makes. He only ever asks for things He knows we can do.

But not only that. Jesus only ever asks us to do things that He knows are good for us. And so here He knows that the cost of unforgiveness is so huge that we must do it even though forgiveness is really hard. If we don’t it will eat us and the people we love.

And this is the danger. So notice how Jesus says, “If someone sins against you watch yourself.” That’s strange. Usually when someone hurts me I watch them to make sure they don’t do it again. But Jesus says the greater danger here is what can happen in you. Watch yourself when you are sinned against.

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So maybe you’ve heard this story. As a young man, an aspiring artist was rejected twice by a prestigious art academy in a way he felt was unfair. But humiliated and angry, he refused to let it go. He couldn’t move on. He let bitterness fester. He blamed others—especially one racial minority—for his failure.

And over time, that resentment – along with several other factors – warped his view of the world and grew into a poisonous ideology. And his inability to forgive didn’t just ruin his own life—it helped ignite one of the darkest chapters in human history. That young man’s name was Adolf Hitler.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now my point is not that if you fail to get into art school you will attempt to take over the world. Rather it’s like what Hebrews 12 says:

Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many. (Hebrews 12:15)

Watch out! Jesus says if your brother or sister sins against you, you must forgive them.” Why? Because if you stay angry it will bring trouble to you.

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In His book “Forgive” Tim Keller does a word study on the anger of unforgiveness. And he says there are three words in English that all share one Anglo-Saxon root.

The first word is “wrath”, which means anger. But it’s a special kind of anger. And so the second word is “wreath” which is a Christmas ornament you make by twisting branches into a shape. And the third word is “wraith” which is an old word for a particular kind of ghost. A wraith is a shadow of a person who was wronged in life but was never able to forgive. And so now in death they are doomed to relive the wrong they received forever haunting that space. Their eternity is controlled by their past.

Now Christians don’t believe in ghosts, but we do believe that after you die you go on forever in one direction or another – we talked about that last week. And the trajectory we start in this life matters. It’s not live in one direction, then die, and boom go to heaven. So there is more truth to the danger of unforgiveness than we might think.

If you stay angry and refuse to forgive, you end up twisted by that anger. You become a joyless person. You grow into someone who can’t trust people. And it’s terrible. It’s not life now and it doesn’t lead to life forever. So if someone hurts you, watch yourself. That’s how big forgiveness is. It’s hard, but so much on the line so we must do it.

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So how? Well next Jesus gives us tools to put forgiveness into practice. And it might feel strange to talk about *practicing* forgiveness, but Scripture says forgiveness is something we must *do*—not something we must feel like doing. There is duty here. And so Jesus gives us three tools or ways to practice forgiveness that keep us from becoming twisted.

The first tool to practice is recognition. So look how Jesus describes the person who hurt us. He says:

If your brother or sister sins against you…. forgive them. (Luke 17:3)

Now when someone wrongs us, our instinct is to think of how different we are from them. Like the other day I was in the gym and there’s this big meathead who always leaves 12 plates on every machine he uses so that the next guy gets to think about how small and insignificant he is as he puts away the plates. And this makes me angry because I would never do that. I’m not like him. I’m considerate; he’s a meathead. Plus I can’t lift that much.

But Jesus doesn’t say “If a meathead sins against you forgive him”, He says “if a brother or sister sins again you.” Ahh. Jesus assumes that the person who is wronging you is just like you. And there are two sides to this.

First, we’re both human, and if I’m going to forgive you when you hurt me I need to see this. Like when you lie, my tendency is to write you off as a liar. That’s why you treat me like you do. You’re not human. And of course it’s different when I lie. I lie because life is complicated. But Jesus says, “No, to forgive, we have to bring ourselves down from being better than the people who hurt us – we are all sinners, and at the same time we need to lift them up. They aren’t meatheads and liars, they are human. The first tool Jesus tells us to practice is recognition.

The second tool is in the word “forgiveness” that Jesus uses. So there are two words for “forgive” in the New Testament, and this one specifically refers to releasing someone from a debt.

So if you squirt mustard on my shirt at the Sunday School BBQ we are going to have on July 20th – shameless plug – then two things can happen. Either you can buy me a new shirt, or I can say “Don’t worry about it.” But if I say that then Nikki has to buy me another shirt. With forgiveness someone always pays.

And it’s the same with emotional debts. To forgive requires that we let go of seeking repayment. So if you rob me of happiness or respect or opportunity then I can make you pay. You made me unhappy so I’ll make you unhappy. I can talk you down behind your back or Canadian style I can stew on it and secretly gloat when things go badly for you. And in those moments I’ll feel good. Some of my happiness will be coming back. But it’s going to be a twisted happiness. It’s wreath happiness on its way to wraith. It’s going to make me hollow if I feed it.

And so Jesus says, “if you want to live then you need to forgive” – I need to be prepared to pay the debt I’m owed instead of making you pay.

But that’s hard! I mean if you’ve really hurt me, then for me to not try to get you back costs a lot. It’s hard not to talk you down when someone brings you up. It’s hard not to gloat when things go bad for you even if that gloat looks remorseful. And trust me, I can make gloating look humble. They teach this in pastor school.

But Jesus says when someone hurts you, don’t make them pay, pay it yourself. This is how you forgive.

The final tool Jesus tells us to practice is the rebuke. “If your brother sins against you rebuke him.” Now finally we are getting to the good stuff, right? Yes! Maybe not. There is a parallel between this passage and the one in Matthew 18. And there Jesus says:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. (Matthew 18:15)

So here we see the motivation behind the rebuke. It’s not to call them out. It’s not to rake them over the coals. The goal is to win them back. So we really have to watch ourselves here. In fact we have to forgive before we rebuke because if I’m hurt and rebuking you then I’ll try to make you pay. But that’s the opposite of what Jesus wants.

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So how do you know when you’ve got Jesus’ heart and are able to rebuke a brother? Well you’ll know when you really want to stop the person from continuing to hurt themselves. See it’s not loving to go all Canadian on someone when they hurt you and pretend nothing happened. That’s just letting them hurt themselves some more. But until you actually want them to stop hurting themselves you aren’t ready to rebuke. And that means you actually have to forgive them first.

So you have to recognize you are just like them – they are human, and you are a sinner too. And you have to be willing to pay the cost of forgiveness yourself. Buy your own shirt. And only then are you able to practice the rebuke Jesus requires.

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So that’s hard. That’s massive! Like maybe super Christians can do this, but there’s no way I can pull this off. So “Lord, increase my faith.”

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Well Jesus knows what we are thinking even before we think it, and so He ends with a metaphor about a mustard seed and a strange story about a master – we’ll start there. So in verse seven Jesus says:

“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke 17:7-10)

So this is a story about a master and a servant. And in this story Jesus says we are the master. And our servant has been working hard, but now it’s dinner time. And Jesus says there’s no way you’ll let the servant eat first. They have to cook dinner!

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Now if this sounds harsh, we need to modernize it. So imagine after church you head over to Choco’s for lunch. And there is a cook who has been working since 8am. Do you go in and say “Hey, you’ve been working hard. Take your lunch break now”? Not a chance. When you show up at a restaurant you expect to eat.

And when you finish, if it was good you might send compliments to the chef. But imagine the chef stopped you at the door and said, “Hey, you haven’t appreciated enough what I’ve done for you. I was here at 8. Show some more respect.” That chef is getting fired. You don’t owe him anything. You paid. He just did his job.

And Jesus says that’s what it’s like with us and God. When we’ve done what He’s told us to do – including forgive – we haven’t earned some great merit with Him so now He owes us. We’ve just done our duty.

Remember Jesus is talking to His disciples here, but He knows that we are susceptible of becoming like the older brother from the Prodigal Son story. We think if we do some good stuff for God He owes us. And we start acting like the master when really we are the servants.

And in this context then, when we refuse to forgive, we aren’t remembering who we are. We are acting like the customer when we’re the cook. We owe God everything. He made us and redeemed us. He’s the King and we are the servants. And we need help to remember our place. Lord, increase our faith.

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And then He does. Jesus fills us with the power to pull it off. He says, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed anything can happen – even forgiveness.”

Now this isn’t faith in general, it’s faith in Him. What He’s saying is if you have the smallest understanding of what I’ve done for you, then you can forgive. You don’t need more faith to forgive, you need to see Me. You need to see what I’ve done for you.

So what is it that will change us into people who can forgive? Well, the only way to fix a servant from acting like the king is for them to see the beauty of the King who became a servant. The only way you will be empowered to forgive the little debts people have racked up against you is when you see the King dying on the cross to forgive your great debt. But if you see this it will change you. If even a mustard seed amount of the gospel gets into you this mulberry bush or mountain will jump into the sea.

So hear this, don’t let wrath wreath you into a wraith. Let Jesus become your life. See how much He loves you. See how much you’ve been forgiven. And then turn that forgiveness towards everyone who has hurt you.

Friends, if you’ve met Jesus, you don’t need more faith. Even if your encounter with His gospel is only the size of a mustard seed it’s enough that it will set you on a trajectory of forgiveness that will grow into the abundant life Jesus wants for you; a life that starts now and lasts forever. So feast your eyes on Jesus and forgive.

1. Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/generosity-and-relationships/> (Accessed July 2, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler’s Vienna: A Portrait of the Tyrant as a Young Man* (1999) as cited by CHATGPT [↑](#footnote-ref-2)