

Helping or Hindering?

Our New Testament reading is Luke 17:1-10. These words of Jesus seem to be entirely separate teachings about sin, faith and duty, but we'll note a connection of thought where Jesus is portraying the distinguishing marks of the people of God, in sharp contrast with the characteristics of the Pharisees.

Follow as I read **Luke 17:1-10**:

17 Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!"² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.³ Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"⁶ The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

⁷ "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'?"⁸ Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?"⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Jesus tells us today through these words from Scripture, "Don't be like the Pharisees!" The Pharisees, who were the religious leaders most zealous for the Old Testament Scriptures and their many additional laws, customs and traditions, weren't all bad. In fact, the Pharisees played an important role in preserving Judaism during the centuries of the pagan Greek cultural invasion throughout the three centuries before Christ and also during the subsequent Roman invasion and occupation of Palestine. The Pharisees had preserved Scripture and protected the temple and its worship and were the "watch dogs of the faith."

But in the words of Eugene Peterson, during the years and centuries of accumulating religious rules and regulations, they had become "religious crustaceans," with all of their bone structure on the outside. What once was an internal and personal faith had become all external, rigid and lifeless. Once they had a grand vision of God and the kingdom, but now the Pharisees had become small-minded and obsessed with details of behavior and appearance required for being a good Jew.

Jesus says, "Don't be like the Pharisees!" He tells us how we, his disciples, are to be different from those whose religion had become all rules and no life. In contrast to the Pharisees we're to be people of love (vv.1- 4), acting responsibly

and compassionately toward one another, toward kingdom of God insiders and outsiders. By contrast, the Pharisees had become obsessed with their individual piety, and indifferent and even hostile toward those whom they considered to be outsiders. The key phrase in these verses is Jesus' warning, "Be on your guard" ("watch yourselves" NIV, 3). Jesus warns against the danger of being obsessed with our own goodness and increasingly blind toward our own sinfulness, which was the sin of the Pharisees (John 9:35-41).

We're warned to steer clear of leading into sin those Jesus refers to as the "little ones." The "little ones" (2) could refer to little children, other disciples, young disciples or even potential followers of Jesus. I think Jesus is including all who are vulnerable to negative influence. Jesus rebuked his disciples who tried to prevent little children from coming to him. Jesus welcomes children to come to him and even upholds them as examples in faith, trust and acceptance (Lk. 18:15-17). Parents have a particular responsibility to help their children know about Jesus and to embrace him in loving trust and childlike faith. And by negative example parents can hinder rather than help children come to faith in Jesus.

Jesus warned his disciples to not be like the Pharisees, who were not only keeping themselves out of the kingdom but were also hindering others through their legalism and hypocrisy (Matt. 23:13; 25f, etc.). Our temperament and conduct, even in church among fellow believers, can be a cause of sin. We can't excuse harsh words and treatment of others in the body of Christ by attributing our behavior to our natural disposition. Perhaps it's your nature and the reputation of people of your nationality to be short-tempered or brutally frank in your conversations and criticisms of others. But as followers of Christ, with the indwelling, fruit-bearing Holy Spirit, there's no excuse for being rude or unkind.

I used to have red hair and am Scotch-Irish, but that's no excuse for having a short temper. Christ within us is to control us and be seen through us, and apart from the Spirit, we'll indeed cause others to be offended and fall out of fellowship with the Christ and the church. And how we act around and relate to unbelievers will also either help them move closer to Christ or further away from him. That can be through our unkindness, speech, and perhaps worst of all, indifference. It's a trite sounding cliché, but perhaps bears repeating: We're the only "Bible" some people will ever read, and certainly we don't want our lives to point in the wrong direction. Pharisees are blind guides, Jesus says, ignorant of God's will and then leading others in the wrong direction (Matthew 23:16-22).

(My own former evangelical denomination has been plagued with an enormous scandal, following the disclosure of a widespread attempt on the part of denominational leaders to conceal accusations made against influential pastors and denominational leaders by victims of sexual abuse. One of the many whose sexual indiscretion was publicized I know personally to having preached to

thousands in his megachurch about the importance of sexual purity and marital fidelity!)

William Barclay tells of an old man who lamented a prank he'd committed as a young man and had never confessed to authorities. He had twisted a highway sign that pointed to two different directions. After twisting the sign, he had pointed it toward the wrong way to two different towns, misleading motorists who came to this intersection. The old man feared that many people were misled to the wrong destination.

Jesus warns us to not turn the direction signs that people follow, to not cause "little ones" to sin. Jesus says, in using the millstone around the neck metaphor, that death by drowning would be better than causing one of these little ones to sin. Unlike the Pharisees, we're to be a positive influence on those who fall and, in particular, those who sin against us.

The offended one is to forgive with unlimited forgiving. This "seven times a day" (4) is Jesus' way of saying there's to be no limit to our forgiving the repentant. Obviously Jesus is referring to the real possibility that the person who offends and whom you forgive is a really obnoxious pain in your neck! And you might even have reason to doubt their sincerity. But our part is simply to forgive, just as Christ has forgiven us countless times (Matt. 6:14f; 18:21ff; Col. 3:13). As Paul wrote in the great Love Chapter, Christ-like love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5). Such forgiveness is nothing extraordinary, but is simply a part of the daily life of those whose lives are oriented around the merciful God.

Jesus says don't be like the Pharisees in the matter of faith (5f). For the Pharisees, faith had become a matter of doctrinal assent and proud tradition. It was devoid of any kind of relationship with the living God. They claimed to be sons of Abraham, the father of those who believe; yet Jesus said they in fact had another father—Satan (Jn. 8:31-47). The Pharisees had a presumptuous dependence on their religious pedigree and performance of religious rituals to qualify them for heaven (Lk. 18:11f). They were closed in mind and heart to Christ Jesus, who was the Son of God and the way to a relationship with God.

As the people of God we're saved by grace through faith and are called to live by faith (Col. 2:6). We now live by faith and no longer by sight, i.e. by the world's perspective. We have the eternal, kingdom view of life. In the face of life's daily challenges we, like these first disciples, turn our life into a continuing prayer: "Increase our faith!" (5). The Pharisees didn't understand faith this way, but rather as a commodity they had acquired or as religious status achieved by their outward conformity to law and tradition. How could they possibly grow in faith, since they already "had it made?"

But like the disciples with Jesus in the first century, we too realize our need, our desperate need for faith as a way of looking at the world and seeing God's hand

at work, his kingdom behind the bewildering scenes of history and current events. Jesus said they didn't need more faith; they already had faith as a dependent love relationship with God and grace to trust and to follow him. A helpful little book is NT Wright's *Small Faith, Great God*. Jesus said our faith need only be the size of a mustard seed, which was commonly thought to be the smallest seed in the agrarian culture of first century Palestine. We're not to focus on our faith but rather our faith is our prayerful dependence on God. Simply put, faith is trust.

Jesus said we're to not be like the Pharisees but rather are to be people of humble service (vv.7-10). His parable pictures a small farmer in Palestine, who can afford only one servant, who has to be both a farm hand and the household servant, doing all the domestic chores as well. His life is not unusually difficult. In fact, being this man's servant was a better alternative than trying to make it on his own. And his chores were very ordinary, ending with a meal served about mid-afternoon. The picture is not one of a harsh but very typical master in a commonly acceptable and even agreeable life situation in this cultural context. And Jesus is thereby simply reminding us that we're God's servants. Servant and servant-hood were concepts long forgotten by the Pharisees, who had become enamored by and accustomed to religion serving them and adding to their personal power and wealth (Lk. 16:14-15). The idea of servant-hood was not a welcome notion to the disciples either (Lk. 9:46-50; 22:24-30).

We enter into the service of the Lord the moment he calls us to follow him because he's always serving, and to follow him is to join him in his service (Jn. 12:26). To serve Jesus and to serve with Jesus is to accept the role he's given us and to reject the Pharisaic notion that there is a hierarchy in the kingdom of God. His requirement is not for our measurable success but rather is for our faithfulness as his servants (Matt. 25:21), even in the simplest way, such as serving coffee in the narthex.

The Pharisees thought they had a claim upon God's grace and favor. Their performance of religious duties, they thought, put God in their debt, and they fully had a right to expect God to "pay up," with this "tit for tat" mentality. It was the "I'll do this for you if you do something for me" kind of attitude. The Pharisee's expectation is that if we simply assent to the right doctrine, belong to and support the church, and live decent, law-abiding lives, we can expect God to give us safe, trouble-free lives and a sure ticket to heaven. It's the least he can do!

Contrarily, Jesus says we can never deserve God's grace. We're always in debt to his mercy and grace, and all we have is his free gift (1 Cor. 4:7). The price that God has paid for our forgiveness and his free gift of eternal life places us in a debt we can never repay. Indeed we are unworthy servants (10).

We have a Master who serves us. The Pharisees would never have understood, much less accepted, that Jesus is a Master who serves us. They would reject

any thought of a messiah who would stoop to serve, even as they rejected the Christ of humility who surrendered himself to the cross. Their messianic expectations were for immediate earthly power and political deliverance. Yet these first disciples and we have come to understand the marvelous truth that our Messiah is a servant. Because he first came to serve by giving his life for us and his example to us, we now are both called, motivated and empowered to serve him by serving one another (Mk. 10:45; Jn. 13:1-17, Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus is not a heartless slave driver but is a faithful companion who gives us the privilege of serving with him as he lives his life in us and *as us*. The Servant-Master Jesus never asks us to do what he's not doing or go where he doesn't go, as people of faith and with a loving heart to serve. Unlike the Pharisees, let's be people of love, faith and service, forgiving even the most obnoxious and unlovable, including the worst legalistic, unloving Pharisee we know. Let's also be mindful that our lives, including brief encounters with strangers, will be a help or a hindrance to those God may be drawing to himself. Unlike the Pharisees, we're walking alongside Jesus, serving others wherever we live and wherever we go. Always helping; never hindering.