

Luke 17:1-10
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 5, 2025

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

[Jesus asked,] “Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 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.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For *weeks* we have heard (and, in the Scriptural text of St Luke, for three-and-a-half *chapters* we have heard) Jesus teach through various parables about the narrow entrance into heaven, about the call of repentance that is a call to safety, and about the focus of not missing out on the eternal feast of the kingdom. This morning, all of that teaching culminates, if you will, in the verses that lay before us... no longer verses of *parables* and teaching *images*, but now verses of straightforward teaching for you to hear plainly and directly. And, in these verses, Jesus talks about the life of repentance and forgiveness within the Church, that life so dependent upon faith in God's plans, that life that trusts and lives accordingly.

Jesus begins this text by focusing on our life with one another... how we [sinners dwelling with sinners as mutual beneficiaries in the family of God] need to be humbly careful for each other's sake, humbly willing to recognize the Church's life of repentance and forgiveness, not only with God but (here, the focus

is) with one another. And Jesus begins with a most chilling word – in the English, “Temptations”... but in the Greek, σκανδαλα. – scandals, offenses, stumbling blocks, traps. And Jesus say they are *sure* to come (or, from the Greek, it is impossible that they not come). In other words, the devil is so active, one ought never believe the life of the Church will be some pure, innocent utopia that can never be bothered by the Accuser.

But, Jesus points out, “Woe to the one *through* whom they come.” That’s a warning to you! He warns that even Christians may be the “through whom”! Are we in our sinful weaknesses any match for the devil? As we grow weary in bearing our daily crosses, will Satan not find a way to *use* us to be the scandalizer on his behalf... *through* whom the temptations come?” The one who thinks he is strong enough that the Accuser could never use him for scandals against spouse, children, parents, fellow Christians... that one is probably *first* on the devil’s list of unwitting assistants.

So, what does Jesus say? – “Pay attention to yourselves!” Not only as potential *victim*, but as potential *scandalizer*! How deep is our corruption, that we who bear the name of Jesus can scandalize one another – not even maliciously – but even If we simply don’t pay attention to ourselves. Self-assuredness opens the door for all types of wickedness; even just the weariness of bearing our crosses opens the door for all types of wickedness. So, pay attention to yourselves!

‘And,’ Jesus continues, ‘pay attention not only to yourselves but to your brother!’: “If your *brother* (fellow Christians) sins, rebuke him.”

“Rebuke him?” you say. “That sounds so harsh, unloving! I’m not going to be involved in such an unloving theology of Jesus!” you say. But the Greek word for “rebuke” (ἐπιτιμαω) means “warn fittingly to prevent further damage.” It’s an act of love, to warn your brother that, if he continues on in that sin, he could be used by the devil as a scandalizer!

“You’re sinning! Don’t you see how the devil could use that to really harm someone and cause one of these little ones – your fellow brother in Christ – to stumble, to sin in kind, to be scandalized? Instead, repent. Turn around and do not allow yourself to be the devil’s instrument for a ‘mountain of destruction’ much greater than this little ‘mole hill’ I’m warning you of, I’m ‘rebuking’ you for.”

To be sure, some souls are ‘puffed up,’ the Old Testament reading says, and they only hear judgment and so refuse to repent. But, one who lives faithfully in the life of repentance and forgiveness within the Church recognizes the love in your concern, the love in Jesus’ teaching, the call to safety... and that one repents. And you forgive him, rejoice with him, and all the angels of heaven rejoice *over* him. And you share in the feast of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the blessed and are strengthened by Christ’s holy body and blood to be on guard and pay attention to *yourselves* and *each other*.

But sometimes, this cycle of repentance and forgiveness can happen in rapid succession... and it really tries us. What happens when the devil finds a real weak spot in a fellow Christian? And the devil goes on an all-out offensive, and the weak soul (maybe spouse, parent, child, fellow Christian in the pew) sins once, twice, three, four, five, six, seven times in the *same day* against you? And yet, with trust in Christ's promises and the power of His Word, you patiently 'rebuke' and lovingly warn your fellow Christian, and each time, the fellow Christian repents because he knows Christ is calling him back to safety, and you *forgive* him – meaning, more properly, you speak Christ's forgiveness to him.

That's an important point in this life of mutual repentance and forgiveness, isn't it... and Christ knows how much you struggle with it, so He says, "When he repents, you *must* forgive him."? In other words, when you forgive, you are not doing so because (or only *when*) you finally feel better. That's not forgiveness! You are not forgiving for *your sake*; you are forgiving for *their* sake – that their sin, the scandal that they took part in, will not be the millstone that drags them into the depth of the sea. You are saying to them that Christ forgives them and, as one equally dependent on the life of forgiveness, who are *you* to hold against *them* a sin that *Christ* has commanded **you** to forgive? – Not to forgive *before* or *without* repentance, but to immediately forgive the penitent in the Church's life and dependence upon repentance and forgiveness.

This is the daily life we all live... and we live it together (home, daily vocation, congregation). And Christ tells us we *must* forgive the penitent because He knows we'd rather *hold on to* others' sin until we feel we've been vindicated... until we feel Christ has had vengeance for us, has delivered us; but the forgiveness of sins is about Christ delivering the one who in that situation has sinned.

That's a tough pill for us to swallow when we know we've been wronged. "Where is the deliverance for me? Where is God's vengeance and his care for his faithful?"

Isn't that what our Old Testament reading from Habakkuk asks?

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity (namely, other people's sin), and why do you idly look at wrong?... The law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth!"

That's how you often feel, isn't it? "Who really wants to live this life of repentance and forgiveness, when it means I'm wronged at times and I don't get to take vengeance? That seems a backward gospel!"

It also seemed that way to Habakkuk. But, he humbles himself before God and says, "I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me..." Notice, Habakkuk doesn't say, "This is unreasonable; I quit!" He says, "Teach me, O Lord."

And how does the Lord respond?: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it... If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

Now what does all that mean, and how does it tie in to the Gospel Reading?

Let’s start with the fact that Habakkuk says he will stand at the watchpost and the tower and await the Lord. That’s an appeal to his vocation as a watchman; his vocation as a prophet. He may have personal complaints, but his Office calls him to depend upon the Word of the Lord.

And then the Lord says to “write the vision on tablets, so he may **run** who reads it.” And we assume, “Sure, every Christian, run with joy; we’re all so giddy at whatever this vision is. We all can read the Lord’s promises and run with joy!” Well. Maybe. But, that likely may not be what is meant. Faith does not come by reading, but by hearing the Word of Christ.

The one who runs is the *messenger*. He has read the Word of the Lord, and it is his job to run with it to those who wait for the Lord: (Isaiah) “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who publish peace.” And what good news do they bring? What is the vision... the vision that may seem slow, but will not delay? “...who publish peace, who **proclaim salvation**, who say ‘Your God reigns!’” In other words, is the preaching not that our God has won the day through His chosen means? Our vindication! Christ has

died for us in our place. Christ has atoned for all sins, not only mine, but my brother's; and Christ will deliver His whole Church out of this world. His coming may seem slow, but he is not slow as some count slowness... so, while we await the visible return of the One who died for us and ascended on high for us, we may live with trust in God and fervent love for one another... and that means, we may live the *love* of rebuking and forgiving one another, with mutual confidence in Christ's sufficiency: before God and to hold us together (as spouses, as families, as congregations). In short, we can *trust* the safety of the life of repentance and forgiveness.

Now, this sounds so beautiful on paper, but in practice it is messy... which is why Jesus says, "You *must* forgive." And, they quickly respond, "Increase our faith!" They know this seems humanly impossible. Not only for *themselves*... notice that Luke here in verse 5 suddenly calls them the *apostles*. These are the sent ones, the guys who have to go preach this; they have to proclaim this salvation and say to their hearers, "Trust the Word of the Lord, that the life of repentance and forgiveness is safe, is loving, and will be vindicated at Christ's return." And their hearers will say, "I don't know... that's not how the world works... that's not going to protect and vindicate *me*!"

So the apostles say, "Lord, increase our faith." And we always see that as an appeal for increase of personal strength for every Christian; but I just mentioned that they're called apostles because they need to proclaim this Word to skeptical ears. "Increase our faith

that this preaching will work and hearers will believe this!” And so, Jesus says, “If you had faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” ... What do the Scriptures say, what do the Table of Duties say, to the hearer of the Word, “Obey your overseer as one who must give account for your soul.” Obey... not an obedience of slavery, but an obedience of trust in the preaching of repentance and forgiveness.

This uncertain cry of the apostles is a cry that maybe the preaching won’t work. Maybe the Word will not be powerful to turn hearts to trust repentance and forgiveness. And Jesus says, “You can have the faith of a mustard seed”... in other words... “The power is not in whether you preachers believe; the power is in the Word. Just as you can say to the mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” by the same power of the Word you can say to stone hearts, “Be broken and make way for a heart of flesh.”

And what happened when the apostles preached on the Day of Pentecost? – formerly stone hearts who fifty days earlier had killed the Messiah were *pricked at the heart*! “What must we do to be saved?” (in other words, “How can we poor miserable Lazaruses possibly be saved?”)... “Repent. [Do not be like the rich man who ignored the Law and the Prophets. Hear the Lord’s Word of repentance. It is a call to safety. It is a call to benefit from His

forgiveness. It is a call to hide in the merits and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. For he will baptize you and give you his Holy Spirit.”]

This is what the apostles are to preach. And when they have done what they were commanded, and you benefit in the life of repentance and forgiveness, such is not to their praise; rather “we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

And what is true for the preacher is true for the hearer.

When we hear that the Lord calls us to **forgive** our spouse, child, parent, fellow Christian, do we believe we are then owed something in return or perhaps now that we have a ‘one-up’ on our fellow Christian?

When the Lord calls us to **repent** (and, most often that call to repentance, as Jesus says in our text, comes in daily life from a fellow Christian), do we reason of our fellow Christians, “Well, they just have their feelings hurt?” Or, do we explain away our spouse’s call to repentance, “Well, that’s just *your* opinion”? Or, do we suddenly consider the preacher a hireling with no authority but what my heart is willing to give him?

No, in the life of repentance and forgiveness, “we have only done what is our duty.” It is not a *suggestion* to repent; you are lovingly ‘rebuked’ and warned to repent. It is not merely a plea to *politeness* to call you to forgive the penitent, ‘at least when you finally feel better about him’ – no, “*you must forgive*” ... for *his* benefit and clear conscience before God.

The forgiveness of sins is too important, is too beneficial, is too uniquely the key to unlock eternal life... too specifically the entrance to the full inheritance of God for you and me to treat that life of repentance and forgiveness lightly. The life of repentance and forgiveness is your *duty*; but it is even moreso your joy... for it is the life Christ saved you into, baptized you into, and calls you to depend upon... for the cross is finished, the message of the cross proclaimed far and wide, the final deliverance is coming, and “the righteous by [this] faith shall live.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
October 5, 2025