

ON LIVING TOGETHER

by Ray C. Stedman

I have chosen a passage which is addressed to our Lord's disciples describing some of the demands of true Christian living. I have found that one of the great problems of the church in our day (which is resulting in many turning a deaf ear to what the church has to say), is that we tend to assume that because we are Christians everything we do is therefore Christian. Thus we oftentimes succeed in baptizing our carnality! But the demands of Christian true life are far greater than what we so often exhibit. To review those demands is to face the real test of how genuinely Christian we are.

These words come from the lips of the Lord himself and thus they are doubly significant. Luke 17:1-10:

And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

"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 sit down at table?' Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" {Luke 17:1-10 RSV}

Our Lord here makes four apparently disconnected comments on life. Each one is a fit subject for extended study and we could well spend a message on each, but for the present I wish to take them together as a unit, briefly and not exhaustively, to try to discover the underlying element that ties these four comments together. There is one tie which unites them and it forms the basic purpose of our Lord in giving these comments at all.

He is examining here certain common attitudes about life, attitudes which were as common in those days, as they are today, for people are the same in every generation and every century. Our Lord is looking at the lives of people around him, and the lives of his own disciples, and he is singling out certain attitudes which are basically wrong. They are attitudes which we all have, but which he says are no longer consistent with the new life that is ours in Christ, and he is showing why they cannot be permitted in the Christian life. So, in these four comments he is essentially demolishing excuses. He is removing certain dangerous attitudes and exposing the false refuges which disciples sometimes take.

Look at the first one.

"Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin." {Luke 17:1b-2 RSV}

Here our Lord is answering the common attitude, "What I do is my own business." It is an attitude we frequently have, the idea that we are not responsible to anyone else, and no one else has the right to make demand or claim upon us with regard to our behavior. It is basically the old question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" to which so many of us answer essentially, "No, I'm not." But our Lord is awakening a sense of

responsibility to others in these words.

This is fundamental to Christianity. No one can be a Christian and ignore his brother. No one can be a Christian and fail to recognize that his life has influence upon other lives around, and that influence governs and limits to some degree the activity of every Christian. Notice the practical aspect of this in our Lord's words:

First, he acknowledges the sinful atmosphere of life as it is today: "Temptations to sin are sure to come." Literally he said, "It is impossible but that offenses will come" -- that is, that's the way life is.

The Bible makes clear that human life is not being lived as God intended it, that something has come in to derail mankind, and therefore man is not fulfilling God's will but lives under a false philosophy, a false approach to life; under a power, a subtle influence that controls his thinking and brainwashes his attitudes. Because of this deviation, temptations to sin are sure to come, we cannot avoid them. "But," he says, "don't let that be an excuse for becoming a channel of sin." It is true that there is a sinful atmosphere in which we must live, but we must repudiate the fatalism that some would assume. We might say, as some do, "Well, if this is the case, what's the use of trying to behave myself? Why should I? Why should I worry about anyone else? They're going to be tempted anyhow." Notice our Lord cuts right across that, "but woe to him by whom they come." Don't be the channel through which temptation comes to another. You don't have to be such a channel, as a Christian.

These words are addressed to Christians, to disciples, and he is answering the attitude of so many of us. "If I don't do it, someone else will." Have you ever said that? No, says the Lord Jesus, don't say that. "Woe to him through whom they come." You don't have to be the channel of someone else's downfall.

Then notice how clearly and bluntly he puts the terrible effects of this. "It is better," he says, "that a millstone be hung about his neck, and he be cast into the sea." That is the way it reads here using the passive voice. In the Greek it can as well be read in what is called the middle voice which indicates reflexive action. He is then saying, "It is better for him to hang a millstone about his own neck and cast himself into the sea." It is better to commit suicide than to be an instrument of someone else's downfall. How we need to heed these solemn words these days when so many are suggesting that it doesn't make any difference what you lead another person to do, that if the experience you lead him into is fulfilling or satisfying, you don't need to worry about the results -- nothing serious will occur. But Jesus says quite the opposite. He says it would be better for you to take your own life than to find yourself a deliberate channel by which someone else is introduced to evil.

What does he mean by this phrase, "these little ones"? He does not only mean children, although I think every parent here, watching this baby dedication service, felt something of a sense of awesome responsibility in realizing that their children are going to reflect their lives, and that they, too, will sit under this judging word of our Lord's. It is better that a millstone should be hung about our neck than that we should deliberately misguide these little ones. The latter phrase means, essentially, "innocent ones," anyone who has not yet experienced evil in some particular form. I think there is going to be a terrible fulfillment of this curse someday. Our Lord does not say what the penalty is, he simply leaves it hanging there, content to contrast it with being drowned in the sea. Even that is better than what will be the penalty for those who lead others astray. Think of that when you are tempted to introduce some young person to wrongful sex, or to the use of drugs that will destroy his brain and his humanity, or whatever else it may be. These searing words judge us.

Then he goes on to the second thing,

"Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him;" {Luke 17:3 RSV}

This is closely related to the first comment. He is giving to these disciples, who felt the sharpness of his first word, the key to its performance. "Take heed to yourselves." How do you properly influence another person? How do you avoid leading them into temptation? By taking heed to yourself. That is the place to start. Do not wait and insist that the whole world change; begin with yourself. That is always the place to start.

The essential change which he is asking is that we learn to be forgiving. Is that not wonderful? How we judge each other in ruthless condemnation, cutting each other off, refusing to speak to one another or to have anything to do with each other, because of some trivial irritant! Our Lord says this must not be your attitude as a Christian; learn to forgive. He is answering here the attitude of so many who say, "If so-and-so doesn't shape up soon, I'm through. I've had it." What is he teaching us here? The need for patience with one another. The need to exercise forgiving, understanding patience.

Remember that Paul had to learn that. There was a time when he was irritated with young John Mark because he withdrew from the first missionary journey and went back. Paul said, "I'm through with him, I don't want him any more." But God dealt with Paul, and later on you find him writing to Timothy, "If John Mark is there, bring him with you; I can use him in the ministry," {2 Tim 4:11}. He had to forgive him even as the Lord exhorts us here to do.

But now notice the two steps. These are very important, but I can only touch on them briefly. There are two things he says to do: "If your brother sins rebuke him." Do not let him go on ignorant of why you won't speak to him; tell him, let him know.

A friend was telling me just this week of a letter another had written, saying how glad he was that nothing was going wrong, everything was fine in his life. Yet my friend had received letters from others about this person saying that there were some matters drastically wrong. But this person was utterly ignorant of them. Why? Because those Christians around him did not love him enough to tell him. It is not an act of love to hide what bothers us. Bring it out. There is no other way to get it settled than to bring it out.

"Rebuke him," says the Lord Jesus. That is as much your responsibility as the command to forgive. Tell him what is wrong. Do not "white lie" to him, but tell him. Then, if he repents, forgive him. And if he does it again, seven times in the same day, you must forgive him. That is the problem, is it not? We say, "I forgave him twice, but the fellow is still doing it." Well, forgive him again, says the Lord, and again, and again. In another place he makes it 490 times, seventy times seven, which means, of course, that you are never to quit.

What kind of a sin is it that can be committed seven times in one day? Dr. Henry Brandt has an amusing story along this line, of a husband and wife. The husband said to the wife one day, "Dear, you know, you have a habit that bothers me no end. I've never said anything to you about it but I get so irritated by it. I wish you'd stop it." "Well," she said, "what is it? I'd be glad to stop it if I knew what it was." "Dear, you're a door-slammer. Every time you go through a door you slam it behind you. It bothers me, and I wish you'd stop." She was immediately penitent. "Why, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I did that. I certainly don't want to keep irritating you, and I'll never do it again." And she went out, and bang! She slammed the door behind her unthinkingly. What is he supposed to do then? Forgive her. And the next time she does it? Forgive her -- seven times in a day -- over and over again.

Now we come to the third incident, which grows out of the first two:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." {Luke 17:5-6 RSV}

What a tremendous word on faith! Notice the background.

This is one of the places in the New Testament where I see a great deal of humor. I am always being moved to laughter as I read the accounts of our Lord with his disciples. Notice what happens here. The apostles are feeling the pressure of these great demands of our Lord upon them: the need for being responsible to others and to recognize the power of their influence over others; and then this tremendous requirement to be forgiving toward a brother who has taken a misstep, to be genuinely understanding and accepting toward him, over and over again. They feel the natural impossibility of this, and I think they look at each other and perhaps all of them turn and look at Peter because he was the most difficult of them all, and then they turn to the Lord out of a great sense of weakness and say, "Lord, increase our faith!" If we're going to have to live at this level, then

you're going to have to do something to strengthen us. We can't fulfill these demands unless you increase our faith."

They are perfectly right about that. You cannot live like this unless you are walking in fellowship with the Son of God. It is only the Lord's life in you that can give you this kind of reaction to these situations. They are perfectly right about that; but they are wrong about something else. They are wrong about their understanding of the nature of faith. Obviously they are thinking of faith as some kind of outward commodity that God can give in measurable amounts, 10 lbs., or 50 lbs., of faith, whatever you need. If you lack, then come to him and he pours in more faith, fills up your reservoir. We need faith in quantity -- more faith. We use that language yet today and properly so, for even our Lord spoke of those that had "little faith." But it is wrong to think of it in a quantitative sense. That is not what the Lord means and that is why he goes on to correct them. He says, "Look: Faith is like a mustard seed; and if you had faith like that, you can do impossible things." He even chooses the most dramatically impossible of all. He says, "See this sycamine tree growing here in the ground? If you understand the nature of faith you can say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,'" -- not simply be cast into the sea -- be planted, i.e., the tree would continue to grow in the midst of the sea, which is utterly impossible.

Why does our Lord choose that example? It is not because he wants us to be miracle workers, going about demonstrating remarkable things, supernatural activity. You cannot read the New Testament and take it that way. These miracles were not the foremost thing in his own life, as he said again and again. They did not really change people. When his ministry drew to a close, hardly anyone was left who had seen the great miracles. No, that is not what changes people. And Christ is not after that kind of disciples today. What he is saying here is that you can do things that look impossible, utterly impossible, but as his other verses make clear, those impossibilities must always be in line with the will and purpose of God. If God wants, for some reason, a sycamine tree to be rooted up and planted in the sea, then you can do it. Faith that fulfills God's will is always equal to any demand; but it is not magic.

What is he really saying here? He is saying to these disciples, "Look: Faith is like a seed, tiny and small, but, if you plant it, it will grow." All seeds have that power. But in particular, faith is like a mustard seed: it has the quality of irritating others, stirring them up, moving them. Perhaps you are saying to yourself, as these disciples were, "We can't do this, there's no use trying; it's hopeless." But our Lord is answering that common attitude: "Why try? If God would only give me the faith then I could, but until he does, it's hopeless; I'm not even going to try." Have you ever said that? But Jesus is saying, "Look: Start with the faith you've got." Faith grows, therefore, start where you are, and you will find that, as you do, faith will grow. And, like mustard, it has an amazingly pungent quality about it; it will stir others up, and soon you will find yourself and them well on the way to your goal.

That is the story of every great work for God that has ever been done through all the twenty centuries of Christian experience -- men and women started with what they had, they did not wait for more faith but began with what they possessed, and it began to grow.

Then the last comment. He said to them,

Will any 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 sit down at table"? Will he not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink"? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? {Luke 17:7-9 RSV}

What is our Lord saying?

After we face the demands of Christian living, these high and holy standards of conduct that the Lord lays upon us because we have his life in us, as we face these and begin to exercise the faith we have, even though they appear impossible of fulfillment, we will discover that we actually accomplish these things. Little by little, as we look back, we see that there have been changes, amazing changes, and things were accomplished that we did not expect. We realize that we have been successful. Then what happens? Sooner or later we will say to

ourselves, "Look how faithful I have been. Now, I have a little favor I'd like to ask of God and surely, after all I've gone through for his sake, he ought to be willing to do this for me." "No," says Jesus, "you're quite wrong; that is not the proper attitude. God is never in debt to any man. When you have lived at your highest and fulfilled all that God demands of you, you have only lived a normal Christian life. You have only done what he asked and expected of you, there is no credit due to you. You have no right, therefore, to make demands upon him." The Lord is correcting the false spiritual pride that often creeps in, to which we are all exposed. He is puncturing the balloon of spiritual ego which says, "I'm obviously quite valuable to God. I doubt if he could get along without me, and therefore I expect some special favors from him." "No," says the Lord, "that is never to be your attitude."

"So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" {Luke 17:10 RSV}

That is the proper attitude; that is what we must say. We are never to be in the position of demanding that God fulfill some favor to us, or to be upset with him because he does not do what we have asked him to do.

But I do not want to leave it there, because I think that, unless that is balanced, it gives a false view of God. That is what he is teaching us as to our attitude, but this is not what he himself is going to do. When we go home to be with him, and we have, to a large or small degree, faithfully fulfilled his will, what will he actually do to us? Is he going to act as in this story? -- and say: "All right, you've been serving me on earth; now you've come home to heaven, get busy. I've got a lot more things for you to do." No, that will not be his attitude. The actions of the Lord toward his own are found in the twelfth chapter of this same book, in Verse 35:

"Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes [these are the ones who have been alert to fulfill what he wants here]; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them." {Luke 12:35-37 RSV}

Is that not amazing? How like our Lord! He will come and serve us.

Years ago I heard of a missionary couple returning from Africa in the days of Teddy Roosevelt. It happened that after years of service they came back on the same ship as President Roosevelt, who was returning from a big-game hunting expedition in Africa. As they were boarding the ship, crowds were there and a band was playing to send the president off, but no one was there to say good-bye to them. The man said to his wife, "Isn't it strange, dear? Here we've given our life to the service of God, spent years in Africa, endured many hardships, lost a couple of our children and buried them out here. It's been very difficult, but nobody really cares, do they? Look at all this folderol that goes on when the president returns from a big-game hunting expedition! But nobody really cares whether we have done anything for God, or not."

All the way across the Atlantic it burned in his heart. Bitterness crept into his soul, and he said to his wife, "I'll bet when we get to New York there will be another band there waiting for the president but nobody will be there for us, we'll be on our own." Sure enough, when they pulled into New York harbor there was a band playing Teddy Roosevelt's favorite songs, and all the high officials of the city were there to meet him. But the missionary couple slipped off the ship unnoticed, and rented a run-down flat on the East Side of New York. The man was utterly crushed, and said to his wife, "It isn't fair, it just isn't fair! Here we are, we haven't any money, we don't know who is going to take care of us or where we are going. God has promised great things, but nothing's happened. We've given him everything we've got, and what has he done for us? But just look at what happens when the president goes on a big-game hunt! It isn't fair!"

His wife said, "Dear, I know it isn't fair, but this isn't the right attitude. You mustn't think this way. Why don't you go into the bedroom and talk to the Lord about it, and see what he has to say?" So he did. He went in and knelt by the bed, alone. He was there a long time, but when he came out his face was alight, and his wife saw that something had happened. She said, "What happened?" And he said, "I got down on my knees

and poured out the whole story to the Lord. I told him that I thought it was so unfair and especially that when we came home the president got this big welcome but no one cared about us. I told him that he was treating us all wrong. But you know what the Lord said to me? It was almost as though I could hear the voice, he leaned down and said, 'But you're not home yet.'

Is it not gloriously true? When we get home he will be waiting for us. He will gird himself and say, "Sit down at my table," and the Lord himself will come and serve us. That is what God is saying to us. What a wonderfully balanced approach to life we have in these words of Jesus! How awesome is the sense of our responsibility for others!

- It is better to be hanged with a millstone and be drowned in the sea than to be a source of error to somebody else.
- How demanding is this need for understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness of each other when we do things that are wrong, even forgiving seven times in a day! But God has given us all that it takes. He has planted in our hearts a faith which looks to him for the answer, which asks of him and he will give us all it takes to do this, if we are ready to begin where we are to move in that direction, trusting him to come through with what is needed.
- Then he cancels out the spiritual pride that threatens to derail us. Thus he balances our life and keeps us useful, worthy, profitable servants, doing that which he commands.

These verses have helped me greatly in the carrying out of many practical details of my life, and I trust they will help you.

This is the kind of Christianity the Lord Jesus wants. This is what he has come to make possible, and this is what we must be in this hour.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for these simple words that come from our Lord's lips. Let us take them seriously, Lord, not only here in this place but this afternoon and tomorrow and all through the week, remembering that we have available to us a wonderful life within, a secret which the world knows nothing about, the Lord Jesus himself, indwelling us and making possible this kind of living. We ask in his name. Amen.

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[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#) | [Series Index Page](#)

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