

Four Characteristics of a Faithful Disciple

Lk 17:1-10

16 June 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am
(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,
When you read the ten verses of our text, it seems at first as if our Lord Jesus is dealing here with four separate issues – yes, four loose-standing topics!
Yet, when you look more closely at these ten verses, then you see (that) they have something in common, i.e. that what our Lord is doing here is **He gives four characteristics of a true disciple of Him.**
And here is the first one...

Not Causing Someone Else to Sin

Just two chapters ago, Jesus spoke against the *Pharisees* who were in the habit of hindering tax collectors & sinners from finding eternal salvation (Lk 15) – tax collectors & sinners whom Jesus were actually seeking out for the kingdom of God!
Well, verse 1 tells us that Jesus is now warning His *disciples* not to commit a similar sin, i.e. not to be a cause of stumbling for sinners who have turned to Jesus for refuge!
You see, Jesus is fully aware of the power of temptation in this world – that, until God's kingdom has fully come, even Christians will struggle against temptation.
Indeed, in this world, it is impossible to put an end to every temptation and enticement to sin! Says Jesus, "Temptations are sure to come!"
Yes, it's in the very nature of sin to spread!
My brother & sister, it would be easier to stop all man-caused emissions of CO₂ on this planet than to eradicate every temptation from the human race – even from the church!
However, though it is impossible to eradicate temptations, by God's grace it is possible to prevent oneself from belonging to the company of those who cause others to stumble!²
Thus, sin & temptation *will* come!
But says Jesus, "Woe to the one through *whom* temptations come!"
So, it's almost like what our Lord once said about Judas Iscariot (in Lk 22:22), "***For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!***"

Yes, Jesus pronounces an oracle of doom over those who would be the cause of putting stumbling blocks in the way of others – others whom Jesus affectionately calls "little ones" because they're very dear to Him!

My brother & sister, is it not already scary *to be a sinner yourself* – a sinner who would one day stand before God's judgement throne!?! How doubly scary would it be standing before the Judge of heaven & earth and to hear you have also led others astray!?!?

¹ In putting together this sermon, I have made ample use of the wonderful words of RC Sproul's audio sermon on Lk 17:1-10, words so well-said that I could not keep them away from my congregation. For the sermon of Sproul, please cf. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/unprofitable-servants/>

² Well-said words of Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.794)

In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul gives a list of the most grievous sins against God. Then, at the end of that list, he says, “Knowing that God hates these things and will condemn those who do it, people not only do them, but they encourage others to do them as well.”³ How does this apply to you & me?

Well, I once knew a respected elderly man – a devoted churchgoer – who openly stated that premarital sex is not wrong!

That’s leading others astray! For what this man said flies in the face of God’s Law!

Then I learned about a church group in the USA that claims same-sex marriage has God’s approval!

Next you hear of even some churchgoers who say that God is not offended by abortion on demand!

The other day I heard that all mainline churches in the USA have adopted all of these sinful positions as part of their official sanctions!⁴

My brother & sister, let’s not be mistaken: it’s not just Christian *leaders* (a pastor, or an elder or deacon or a parent or a teacher) who must watch their words and actions, but *every Christian* has to be careful so that they do not knowingly or unknowingly become the cause for someone else to sin!

Yes, it is not just a church’s official errors of *doctrine*, but also the shady *advice* given in a moment of indifference that can lead others astray and cause them to sin and perhaps even turn their backs on Christ!

And about the person who has caused such falling away, Jesus says (v.2), “***It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.***”

What does this mean?

Well, in Ancient Israel, people used to grind their grain by putting two heavy round stones on top of each other. In the middle of the top stone there was a hole through which people threw the grain so that it could be crushed between the two stones. *So heavy* was this top stone that it had to be turned by an ox!

Well, imagine: if you had that heavy stone as a collar around your neck and you get thrown into the depth of the sea, there’s only one direction you would go – downwards, and fast, and without return!

So, what is our Lord saying?

Well, that such a horrible death would be a better fate than to face God’s judgement for the crime of having caused someone else to sin; or with the result that *that person* eventually turns his back on Christ!

This is how seriously Jesus takes causing sin in the body of Christ – in the church!

So, what does Jesus now say?

Well, He says (in v.3), “Be on your guard!”⁵ “Watch yourselves!”⁶ And He means, “*Constantly watch yourselves!*”⁷

³ Rm 1:32 ***Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.***

⁴ For this, cf. the audio sermon on Lk 17:1-10 by RC Sproul at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/unprofitable-servants/>

⁵ NASB

⁶ ESV & NIV

⁷ Yes in προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς (Watch yourselves), προσέχετε is a present imperative active 2nd person plural (the present tense indicating ongoing action) of προσέχω: to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn of any future danger, need, or error, and to respond appropriately—‘to pay attention to, to keep on the lookout for,

Well, that was point 1 – Not Causing Someone Else to Sin!

And point 2 also deals with a relational matter within the body of Christ, i.e. ...

Forgiving

Yes, Jesus gives us a second characteristic of a faithful disciple, i.e. *to forgive a repentant brother or sister!*

Well, here is something important! You see, there's a widespread misconception amongst Christians that, if someone sins against you, you're dutybound to unilaterally grant him/her forgiveness! And I once saw this in a Christian primary school in Auckland. You see, boy X had hurt boy Y very badly. The teachers came and separated the two boys – which was a good thing! But then, before boy X was given enough time to show his remorse, and to come ask boy Y for forgiveness, the teacher & principal led boy Y (the injured boy) to go say to boy X that he had already forgiven him. That's robbing the sinner from a vital step in spiritual growth!

You see, people remember Jesus' words on the cross as He prayed that the Father would forgive His executioners! *But the Bible doesn't teach that we are required before God to give automatic unilateral forgiveness to anyone who sins against us.*⁸ And that's why the church has drawn up an elaborate procedure for church discipline based upon the New Testament – among other on Matthew 18, which clearly talks of forgiveness *after sorrow and repentance!*⁹

And so, Jesus says (in v.3-4), that if someone has sinned against us, we have to rebuke that person – yes, show our disapproval!¹⁰

But then, here comes the command: If that person repents, then forgiveness is not an option! No, then we *must* forgive him/her even if it's difficult and hurting! Have you done that – forgiven someone even though it was difficult?

You see, I was once called to come settle a dispute between two elderly sisters. They had a brother who was at that time living overseas – a brother who had asked their forgiveness for a minor sin he had committed against them some years before; a sin for which he felt sorry! Now the *one* sister was ready to forgive him, but the *other* sister not!

Well, I believe it was then that the Lord reminded me of some beautiful words in Scripture which I was able to relay to the unforgiving sister – the words of 2 Pt 3:18, ***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.***

“Grow in the *grace*... of our Lord and Saviour...”

to be alert for, to be on one's guard against' (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 332). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁸ Sproul (ibid)

⁹ Cf. Mt 18:15-20 ***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”***

Also cf. the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in the verses which follow – i.e. Mt 18:21-35.

¹⁰ From ἐπιτιμάω: to express strong disapproval of someone—‘to rebuke, to denounce.’ προσλαβόμενος αὐτὸν ὁ Πέτρος ἤρξατο ἐπιτιμᾶν αὐτῷ ‘Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him’ Mt 16:22 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 435). New York: United Bible Societies).

Well, *how* will we grow in the grace of our Lord and Saviour?
Only if we keep on fixing our eyes on Him and learn from Him and see and be stunned by His gracious love-deed for us!
It's like with the person who spends much time amongst the flowers in a flower garden!
The more he is among the flowers, the more he himself starts to give off the smell of flowers!
The more we take in (and are blown away by) the grace of Christ, the more we will show grace!

Now, here comes the harder bit! You see, Jesus says (that) even if that person sins seven times against us and has seven times come in repentance, then we should still forgive him/her! And let's remember: with *seven* times our Lord means an *infinite* number of times – yes, we have to stand ready to forgive repentant people at any time – and at a moment's notice!

Well, this brings us to point 3 – yes, the third characteristic of a faithful disciple...

Trusting

You see, it seems the disciples have listened to Jesus' teaching on endless forgiving upon repentance. Now they are thinking, "O Lord, if that's what you expect of us, then we're going to need more faith than we have!" "So, please increase our faith!"

Yet, He answers as much as, "You don't need a lot of faith to do that!" "***If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.***"¹¹

Of course, Jesus did not mean that they would literally be able to move *trees* or *mountains*!¹² No, He meant that, *spiritually*, they would do wonders in the kingdom of God even with a small measure of faith! After all, *it doesn't take a world of faith to forgive somebody who sins against you!*¹³ All you need to have is faith in how God showed you His enormous grace in Jesus Christ! Yes, all you need to do to show grace is look again at the tremendous amount of grace you yourself have received from your Lord and Saviour!

Well, that was the third characteristic of the faithful disciple – *Trusting* (i.e. having *faith* in what God did for you and what He can do through your full surrender to Him).

So, the disciples (and you and I) have now heard what the true disciple should do... 1) not causing anyone else to sin; 2) forgiving repentant sinners; 3) trusting in the Lord.

But here's the last question: "In what spirit – yes with what heart- and mind-attitude will faithful disciples serve God?"

Serving without Expecting Praise/Merit

Jesus now tells a short parable – a parable of what He must have seen happening in real life in His times on earth! Yes, sadly, this would have been the reality with at least *some* masters and slaves.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Lk 17:6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹² Cf. Mt 17:20 ***He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."***

¹³ Sproul (ibid)

Jesus tells what happened between the owner of a small farm and his one & only slave/servant!¹⁴

This slave slavishly does what he has been ordered to do – yes, *the spirit of a slave* has taken hold of him! All day long he has faced the elements out in the open as he has been ploughing or tending sheep.

Now he comes into the house and obeys his master's orders to first prepare a meal for him, serve him, and only then he (the slave) can eat!

Thus, the servant does exactly what he has been told to do, no less but certainly also no more! And, says our Lord (in v.9), this servant does not even get a single word of thanks from his master!¹⁵

The question is: Why does the slave do all this? Is he afraid of some sort of punishment, or afraid that he might lose his job? I mean, whilst he has a job – even though a slave's job – he has at least food to eat!

Well, here's the point our Lord makes...

If even this slave does his work for even this harsh master – yes, if even this slave knows *he is not deserving special praise, not worthy of particular commendation*,¹⁶ then so much more should we who have tasted not a slave-master's heartless rules but the gracious loving kindness of our heavenly Father – yes, then so much more should we serve without expecting anything in return – just totally devoted to Him who has shown us such untold love! Yes, says Jesus (in v.10), ***“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.’”***

My brother & sister, you & I don't deserve any word of thanks/praise for our service to God! Neither can any good deed which we bring to God earn for us salvation!

Says RC Sproul,

If you have lived a life of perfect righteousness – if you have obeyed every commandment that God has ever given (which you haven't – but if you have), Jesus is saying, “Big deal!” “So what?” “All you've done is what you were supposed to do!” Didn't your Creator make you in His own image? Didn't He call you to mirror and reflect His own character? Didn't He say to you, ‘Be ye holy because I am holy’?”

Do you get it? If I live a life of perfect holiness, I've done nothing to deserve merit – I've added nothing to the weights and measures of the kingdom of God, because I have simply done what was my duty to do!... The Muslims have a view that if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, you'll go to heaven. But if your bad deeds outweigh your good deeds, you'll go to hell. Whereas Christianity says, if your whole life is nothing but good

¹⁴ The Greek word is *doulos* (δοῦλος, η, ον): pertaining to a state of being completely controlled by someone or something—'subservient to, controlled by.' ὡς περ γὰρ παρεστήσατε τὰ μέλη ὑμῶν δοῦλα τῇ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ καὶ τῇ ἀνομίᾳ εἰς τὴν ἀνομίαν 'for as you presented parts of your body to be subservient to impurity and wickedness for wicked purposes' Ro 6:19. In some languages it may be useful to render δοῦλος in the context of Ro 6:19 as a simile, 'like slaves,' for example, 'for as you surrendered the parts of your body to be like slaves to obey impurity and wickedness' or '... to be ordered about by impurity and wickedness' (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 471). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁵ Lk 17:9 ***Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?***

¹⁶ The meaning of the Greek word for "unworthy/unprofitable" in v.10 *achreios* (ἀχρεῖος, ον): pertaining to being without such qualities as deserve praise or commendation—'not deserving special praise, not worthy of particular commendation.' δοῦλοι ἀχρεῖοί ἐσμεν, ὃ ὠφείλομεν ποιῆσαι πεποιθήκαμεν 'we are servants who do not particularly deserve praise; we have done what we should' Lk 17:10 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 429). New York: United Bible Societies).

deeds and you have no bad deeds, nevertheless, without the righteousness of Christ, you'll go to hell forever, because there's nothing you can possibly do to earn your way into the kingdom of God. You can't go to the judgement seat of Christ and say, "I went to church every Sunday for thirty years, I was an elder, I was a minister, I was a deacon, I tithed my money, I fed the poor, I ministered to the sick..." God will say, "But that's what you're supposed to do!!" "Why should I give you a reward for doing your duty!?"

My brother & sister, all we can say is the words of the third stanza of "Rock of Ages, cleft for me." Here they are: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; naked come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Saviour, or I die!"¹⁷

I pray that these four ways will be your/my way of serving as Christ's disciples...

- Not Causing Someone Else to Sin
- Forgiving
- Trusting
- Serving without expecting any praise/merit!

AMEN (2,486 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁷ In our Sing-to-the-Lord it's no. 445. Text by Augustus M. Toplady, 1776; Tune by Richard Redhead, 1853. Melody = Ajalon