

Faith to Forgive

Luke 17:1-6

Introduction

The Peril of Roommates: College taught me a lot of lessons: how to write a paper at 2 am, how to live off of Ramen noodles and coffee, and how to stretch a load of laundry three weeks with Febreze and a prayer. But the first and unexpected lesson started before classes when I had my first non-family roommate (by that point it had been a decade since I shared a room with my older brother).¹ I won't air his dirty laundry (literally or figuratively), but suffice it to say, **relationships get harder the closer you get!** The closer you are to someone, the harder it is to hide *your* selfishness, impatience, pride... The closer you are to someone, the more you'll see *their* quirks, flaws, and failures.

- The *promise* of intimacy comes with an acute *problem*: the people you love the most have the potential and probability to hurt you the most. That's why the song says "love hurts, love scars."²
- Think about it: if a man and a woman love each other enough to commit to a lifetime of devotion, **why are marriages breeding grounds for conflict?** Because a marriage involves two sinners! In the book *When Sinners Say "I Do"*³ (great title!), the premise is that marriage isn't primarily about compatibility, personality, or romance, but a covenant between two sinners who desperately need God's grace.
 - The good news is that the gospel doesn't just save us from sin; it *equips* us to live in forgiveness, repentance, and grace. So a marriage flourishes not when you ignore sin or try to 'fix' your spouse, but when you honestly acknowledge sin and apply the grace of the gospel to each other each day.
- In many ways, the same is true in any covenant community, including a church.
- The tension is real; we need community and intimacy; it's essential. But, like most things worth having, it is extremely difficult.
 - Many of us run from vulnerability because we don't want to get hurt, exposed, or confronted, but that will only harm us.
 - But if we have a community of harsh, graceless, and condemning judgment, that will harm us even more.

Life together in the church requires truth and love,⁴ but is only possible when we embody the grace of Jesus through faith.

- Jesus lays out the path of maintaining a community of gospel grace.

¹ And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he

¹ I was fortunate to have a Christ-loving roommate whom I had gone to school with off and on since 2nd grade (we're still friends to this day!), but living in such proximity was a challenge.

² "Love Hurts" (Nazareth).

³ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say "I Do": Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007).

⁴ Vigilance and forgiveness, accountability and grace, watchfulness and kindness, etc.

were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." ⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ And the Lord said, "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."⁵

1. Step 1: Face the Reality of Sin (v. 1)⁶

¹ And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come,

Live in Reality: We need to reckon with the reality that sin and temptation are an unavoidable part of this fallen world. Jesus literally says, "*It is impossible for stumbling blocks not to come.*"⁷

- Sin is real, and temptation is ever-present. If the devil can trick you into thinking you're immune, you're already in his trap.
- The gospel doesn't ignore sin; it deals with it. Jesus doesn't minimize sin, he defeats it.
- If you pretend you have **no sin**, you're a liar.⁸ But if you abandon every community, relationship, and friendship when sin rears its ugly head, you'll never experience the grace of staying and forgiving.
 - Marriages don't thrive in perfection but in grace. They don't survive on performance but on forgiveness.
- Jesus gives us a path *through*, not a way *around* it.
- There is no ideal life, no ideal community, no ideal church. And if you ever do find the perfect church, **don't join it, because you'll ruin their sinless streak.**

Don't Be Surprised: Temptations are coming, **why are we surprised?**

- In the same way that we shouldn't be surprised at... trial[s] (1 Pet 4:12), tribulations, and afflictions⁹, we shouldn't be surprised at **temptation** and even **sin** in our own hearts and lives, or in the hearts and lives of those close to us.
- When we *expect* sinlessness from ourselves, every stumble feels like despair. When we *expect* perfection from people, every failure feels like betrayal. Misplaced expectations set us up for a surprise attack.
- The gospel doesn't promise us a community without sin, it promises us a Savior who deals with sin.

⁵ ¹ Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ, Ἀνένδεκτόν ἐστιν τοῦ τὰ σκάνδαλα μὴ ἐλθεῖν, πλὴν οὐαὶ δι' οὗ ἔρχεται· ² λυσιτελεῖ αὐτῷ εἰ λίθος μυλικὸς περιέκειται περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔρριπται εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν ἢ ἵνα σκανδαλίση τῶν μικρῶν τούτων ἓνα. ³ προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς. ἐὰν ἀμάρτη ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἐπιτίμησον αὐτῷ, καὶ ἐὰν μετανοήσῃ ἄφεσις αὐτῷ. ⁴ καὶ ἐὰν ἐπτάκις τῆς ἡμέρας ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς σὲ καὶ ἐπτάκις ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς σὲ λέγων, Μετανοῶ, ἀφήσεις αὐτῷ. ⁵ Καὶ εἶπαν οἱ ἀπόστολοι τῷ κυρίῳ, Πρόσθεθι ἡμῖν πίστιν. ⁶ εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος, Εἰ ἔχετε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, ἐλέγετε ἂν τῇ συκαμίνῳ [ταύτῃ], Ἐκριζώθητι καὶ φυτεύθητι ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ· καὶ ὑπήκουσεν ἂν ὑμῖν.

⁶ HT Begg

⁷ "Sure" (v. 1) translates ἀνένδεκτον, literally "not possible" or "inevitable." The phrase reads, "It is impossible that stumbling blocks (σκάνδαλα) not come." A σκάνδαλον is an enticement to sin or a trap (cf. BDAG), akin to the Hebrew שֶׁרֶץ ("to lure, lay a snare"; cf. HALOT), and is often associated with false faith or apostasy.

⁸ 1 John 1:8

⁹ Jn 16:33, Jas 1:2, 1 Thess 3:3-4

The problem isn't that sin exists; it's that I contribute to it. If we're going to be a community of vigilant grace, we must start with ourselves.

2. Step 2: Start with Yourself (v. 1b-3a)

but woe to the one through whom they come! 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. ³ Pay attention to yourselves!

Dangerous Source: Woe to the **disciple** who becomes the source of temptation.¹⁰ It's one thing for the world to throw stumbling blocks; it's another thing when God's people dig the holes.

- Jesus uses shocking imagery—a massive millstone tied to your neck and cast into the sea—to show how serious this is. **Why?** Because to lead a “little one” (a young disciple, a weaker believer, a new Christian) into sin or false faith is deadly.
- Temptation comes in many forms: immorality, idolatry, and apathy. **Jesus warns us: don't be the one who digs the pit your brother or sister falls into.**
- The point is not gatekeeping or condemnation, but love and protection. The church should be the safest place for new or vulnerable believers, not the most dangerous.

Starting Point: So Jesus says, “Pay attention to yourselves.”

- Start here. **Before you ever confront anyone else's sin, guard your own heart.** The greatest threat to the health of a Christian community is not “out there,” it's “in here”.
- There's an order of operations, and step one is you.
- I tell my kids all the time: “Worry about yourself!” Jesus is saying the same thing here.
- We stop watching, we stop praying, we stop examining our own lives. **Spiritual vigilance is not a one-time act; it's a daily discipline:** Am I walking in holiness today?
- Paul says to the Ephesian elders: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). He tells Timothy: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim 4:16).
- Notice the order: first yourself, then others. You can't help others if you can't lead yourself. “My people's greatest need is my personal holiness” (McShayne).

Self-Motivation: Maturity is ownership. You need leadership, you need discipleship, you need accountability, but your personal holiness is ultimately your responsibility. Spiritual maturity means you take ownership of your own life.

- If the health of our church is dependent on Pastor James and me personally meeting each week with every member, then we're cooked! Our job is to *equip* you for ministry, to catalyze mutual discipleship, and to encourage growth and care with each other.
- That requires self-awareness, which is often missing in Christians, even leaders. **How do you cultivate it?**
 - Insight that only God can give through time meditating on his Word and communing with him in prayer.
 - Honesty about your personality and patterns, strengths and weaknesses.

¹⁰ In Matthew's parallel (18:6–7), Jesus says “woe to the world” because the world is a source of temptation.

- Admitting your feelings and sins so you can submit them to Christ's control

Humility Check: We dare not seek out the sins of others until we take ownership of our own sin. "It is natural to see other people's sins; it is grace to see my own" (Kell). "People give as much grace as they think they need" (Christina Edmondson).

- "Spiritual maturity is the ability to lift others up without looking down on them" (Onwuchekwa).
- That's why we must stay **humble**. Humility reminds us: (1) I am a sinner first, a corrector second. (2) I am always in need of the grace I extend to others. (3) I'm not above the brother I rebuke; I'm beside him, equally desperate for mercy. "The ground is level at the foot of the cross."¹¹

But we can't stop with ourselves. If we're going to be a community of vigilant grace, we must also love others enough to speak up.

3. Step 3: Love Enough to Speak Up (v. 3b)

If your brother sins, rebuke him,

Discipline is Love: We need each other to pursue holiness. In the way that a parent's discipline is love, accountability is loving. We all have blind spots that have the potential to harm us. It is not loving to ignore other people's problems (e.g., food in teeth, xyz, balding, etc.). A godly rebuke is a brother or sister saying, "I care about you too much to let sin destroy you."

- But this is **delicate work**; if you come in like a sin-busting wrecking ball, you will destroy people rather than save them. **A rebuke is not an attack.**
- If you hear this and think it's your turn to be the sin police, you need to read more of your Bible. This isn't all the Bible says about sin and accountability.
 - **Quick caveat:** Scripture makes a distinction between sins that require rebuke and offenses that should be borne in love. Not every irritation or hurtful word rises to the level of confrontation. Sometimes godliness looks like covering an offense rather than confronting it: "It is his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov 19:11); "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8). A gospel community isn't built on **constant confrontation**, but **wise confrontation**. Before you confront, ask: (1) Is it a sin or just a preference? If it's merely an annoyance, personality, or preference, bear it; if it's a genuine sin that harms them or others, rebuke it. (2) Is it a pattern or a moment? If it's an isolated stumble, love may simply cover it. If it's a persistent pattern that will entrench sin, rebuke it. (3) Will silence harm or will grace heal? If staying silent enables destruction, speak. If staying silent gives space for grace to grow, bear it.

¹¹ Jesus said, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matt 7:3). Paul said, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

Rebuke: The word “rebuke”¹² *here* conveys a sense of speaking directly and truthfully to someone about their sin, with the goal of correction and restoration. To keep rebuke **helpful** and **healthy**, we need to hold to three biblical principles:

- **(1) Speak to the person, not about the person.** Private sins do not need to be aired publicly or talked about with others; that’s slander (and there are too many warnings in the Bible against slander).¹³ That tears down, rather than builds up. If someone’s sin becomes an occasion for gossip, you have not rebuked; you have slandered.¹⁴
 - Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered (Prov 11:13).
 - Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends (Prov 17:9).¹⁵
- “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 (Matt 18:15).
 - There may be a time when public rebuke is necessary, especially for persistent, public sin,¹⁶ but the starting point and the ordinary pattern of confrontation is private, gentle, and restorative.
 - People assume I talk to my wife about everything. If something is affecting my mood, I might have to talk to her to protect our relationship. But often, when there is conflict, confession, or sin, I don’t tell her. I don’t want to poison her relationship with someone else. I want to protect their relationship with her.
 - There are times to speak, and times to stay silent; times you must carry another’s burden into the light, and times you quietly bear it in love.
 - **The church should be the place where people are not talked about but talked to.** Gossip kills community.
- **(2) Speak in truth, not speculation.** 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 (Matt 18:16). There’s a reason Matthew 18, echoing Deuteronomy¹⁷, Paul in 2 Corinthians 13, and even the paradigm of rules surrounding elder accountability, require more than one witness:¹⁸ **accusations are not the same thing as evidence.**
 - Healthy rebukes deal with known actions, witnessed behavior, or confessed sins.
 - We rebuke *actual* sins, not *perceived* sins. We deal with facts, not imagined motives. *I’m not the Holy Spirit, and God hasn’t given me the power to read minds or judge hearts. That’s a burden I’m not meant to bear.*
 - Hurt feelings might be an occasion for a conversation, but not a rebuke.
 - Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you includes¹⁹ assuming the best, giving the benefit of the doubt, and reserving judgment.

¹² ἐπιτίμησον

¹³ See Rom 1:29–30; 2 Cor 12:20; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; 1 Tim 3:11; Titus 2:3; Jas 4:11; 1 Pet 2:1.

¹⁴ Gossip is talking about, love is talking to.

¹⁵ “If anyone were permitted to examine our private lives and hear what is said behind our backs, there would be no one with enough friends left” Seneca, *De Ira* 2.28.8

¹⁶ 1 Tim 5:20, Gal 2:11-14

¹⁷ Deut 17:6, 19:15; 2 Cor 13:1

¹⁸ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses (1 Tim 5:19).

¹⁹ The Golden Rule (Matt 7:12)

- People give plenty of evidence; don't invent more. We deal in truth, not vibes. I've heard it too many times: "I felt they were angry with me." That *feeling* is for you to take to the Lord and let go, assuming the best.
- Have you ever read an email or text message and thought, "Why are they mad at me?" They didn't include enough exclamation points or emojis, or they forgot to heart or thumbs up your message. In reality, they might be in the middle of a stressful work situation, or parenting moment, or (shocker!) simply forgot!
- Too often we read into situations. "We don't see things as *they* are, we see things as *we* are," projecting our insecurities, fears, sins, and motivations on others.
- We all need to be **humble** enough to receive rebuke, but we should also be **trustworthy** enough to give rebuke.
- **(3) Speak in love, not vengeance.**
 - "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Gal 6:1).²⁰
 - The aim of a godly rebuke is repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, which can only occur coming from a heart of genuine love.²¹ "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8).
 - A rebuke is not about payback or proving a point, it's not an attack, but an act of love. Rebuke is not about tearing someone down, it's about lifting them up to Christ. **Jesus paid for their sin; it is not your job to make them pay again.**²²
 - **We need to be tough on sin, not each other.** All of us are tempted, none of us is immune; we all desperately need grace.
 - Jesus isn't shocked when you stumble, and neither should we be.

I almost put rebuke as **step 4** because you can't rebuke without real forgiveness. *Speaking up isn't the end goal. If we're going to be a community of vigilant grace, we must forgive freely and fully.*

4. Step 4: The Essential Ingredient – Forgiveness (vv. 3c-4)

and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

Opportunity of Forgiveness: We hear in this conversations echoes of Jesus' interaction with Peter: Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times (Matt 18:21).

²⁰ "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov 15:1).

²¹ You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him (Lev 19:17).

²² Cf. the elder brother of Lk 15

- At the end of the day, **forgiveness isn't an option, but a command.**²³ People say, "I can't forgive," when the truth is, too often you "won't forgive." We live in a highly psychologized culture²⁴ where we let our feelings, too often, dictate our actions.²⁵
- Forgiveness often must be practiced before it is felt.
 - Another caveat: forgiveness is not the same as trust. Forgiveness must be freely and generously given, but trust can be slow to be rebuilt.
- We should always be ready to forgive, even if we are repeatedly sinned against, *especially if the offender repents.*²⁶ You might say, "But doesn't that expose me to continued abuse?" This is the scandal of the gospel, that we would "rather suffer wrong"²⁷ to extend grace, than seek vengeance or mitigate risk.

What Forgiveness Looks Like: Christlike forgiveness looks different than simply ignoring, excusing, or minimizing sin. It's a conscious choice to apply the grace of the gospel to the wounds another inflicted. If I truly forgive you in Christ, I...

- **(1) Won't bring the matter up with you**
 - I won't wait until you mess up next time to bring it up again. I won't weaponize past repentance. I won't file it away as ammunition to use later.
- **(2) Won't bring the matter up with someone else**
 - If I have truly forgiven, I don't turn your failure into gossip. I don't poison your reputation with others by dragging your sin back into the light.
- **(3) Won't bring the matter up to myself**
 - This may be the hardest. We like to replay others' faults in our own minds, condemning them in the courtroom of our minds.
 - "Forgiving you is easy, but forgetting takes the longest time" (Willie Nelson).
 - God can choose to "remember our sins no more" (Jer 31:34). We aren't God, but we can refuse to dwell on past wrongs.
 - "Some can't forget, so they won't forgive; if you can't forgive, there is no chance you'll forget" (Begg).
 - You have influence over the **algorithm of your mind** (e.g., Instagram, "not interested," "reject all cookies"). You are not a slave to your flesh anymore. "Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies" (Rom 6:12). Do not let bitterness, unforgiveness, or slander reign in your mortal bodies. When Satan knocks on the door of your heart and you want to open it, you can say, "No, you're not my master. I've been bought with a price, and the resurrected Christ lives in me."

²³ "Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:28).

²⁴ HT Keller

²⁵ Corrie ten Boom, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, once met one of her former guards after the war. He had become a Christian and asked her for forgiveness. She wrote, "I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion; it is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart." She extended her hand, and in that moment, she felt the love of Christ flow through her.

That's the invitation of this text: you don't have to feel ready — you need to trust Christ by faith. He will supply the grace.

²⁶ Cf. T. Gad 6.3–4, 7; Rom 12:16–21; Matt 18:21–22.

²⁷ 1 Cor 6:7

A Culture of Gospel Forgiveness: Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel, so it must be at the heart of a community of faith called together and shaped by the gospel.²⁸

- Forgiveness will never be possible without recognizing that the other person is your sibling in Christ.
 - We tend to **caricature** and **villainize** others when they sin. When *they* lie, they're a liar. When *I* lie, it's complicated.
- "Forgiveness flounders when I exclude my brother or sister from the community of Christ and myself from the community of sinners" (Volf). In other words, if I see their sin as unforgivable while excusing my own, I will never forgive.
- If we want a church where people can be vulnerable, we must cultivate a culture of grace and forgiveness. That is what a gospel culture looks like. Because Christ has forgiven us, we are to forgive one another (Eph 4:32). bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col 3:13).
 - Forgiveness is choosing to release the debt, because Christ has already paid it.
- Forgiveness is both the duty and the delight of the gospel. It is not optional. It is not secondary. It is the clearest evidence that we actually believe what we say about Jesus.
- We can never be a true community of faith if we are not both repenters and forgivers. However quick you might be to rebuke, you must be quicker to forgive.

This is impossible on our own. If we're going to be a community of vigilant grace, it is only possible through the power of Jesus.

5. Step 5: Trust Jesus for the Impossible (vv. 5-6)

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ And the Lord said, "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.

Possibility of Forgiveness: The possibility of this kind of forgiving heart is only possible through faith in Christ.

- The disciples think they need *more* faith when what they need is genuine faith in the right place.²⁹ "It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch (object) is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch (object)" (Keller).
- It's not the amount of your faith, but its object. A little faith, hesitating faith, timid faith still trusts and follows.
 - It's not the strength of the passenger's grip on the armrest that keeps the plane in the air — it's the strength of the plane. Some passengers sit calmly, others sweat and tremble, but if they're on the plane, they all arrive at the same destination. In

²⁸ Eph 2:13–16; 4:3–6. Unity in the church is not created by human effort but accomplished through the cross of Christ and maintained by the Spirit.

²⁹ Bock argues that it is not the quantity of faith but simply the presence of genuine faith.

the same way, even timid faith in Jesus carries us, because the power is in Him, not in us. Get on the plane!

- Faith the size of the tiniest seed a Palestinian farmer would have, was sufficient to move a tree rooted for centuries, if that faith was rightly placed.
- Forgiveness is not possible by willpower, but by faith in Jesus, who uproots bitterness and plants grace in its place.
 - Faith means shifting reliance from my own ability to Jesus' power. "I can't, but Christ in me can."

Conclusion

Remember the Gospel: I think the engine of forgiveness is my gospel experience. When I don't want to forgive, I remember the gospel.

- I remember what it felt like to feel the freedom of God's forgiving love rather than the weight of shame and condemnation.
- The world's way is to justify resentment, to cling to hurt, to demand repayment. Jesus' way is to cancel the debt, because He has already paid it. "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; he washed it white as snow."
- God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). Forgiveness will never be possible until you shift your focus to the cross.
- **One of the best gifts you can give someone, one of the best ways to magnify God, is to forgive others as Christ forgave you.**
- Unforgiveness is a prison of your own making — but Christ has already unlocked the door. Will you step out into His freedom?

Luke 17:1-6 - Balance of Discipleship

