

luke 17. ³⁻⁶

³“Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. ⁴And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, “I repent;” thou shalt forgive him.”

⁵And the apostles said unto the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

⁶And the Lord said, “If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, ‘Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea;’ and it should obey you.

I’m thinking that if I asked, “Is Jesus a hypocrite?” you would respond with a resounding “No!”

Am I wrong? No?

Then, I guess you’d say that Jesus practices what he preaches.

“Absolutely.”

Well, then, maybe we could have a look at what Jesus teaches about forgiveness in today’s reading.

“If [thy brother or sister] trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, ‘I repent;’ thou shalt forgive him.”

This is extraordinarily difficult on several fronts. First, there is the inherent difficulty of forgiveness itself. It is hard enough to forgive a single painful trespass against us. The trespass can be so hurtful. And holding on to our anger and grievance can feel so good.

But even this is far too simple for Jesus’ consideration. He ups the ante and asks us to forgive—and that over and over and over again—another’s repeated trespasses. Not one time, or two times, or three times, or ten times, but every time—this is the effect of “seven times” as it is a symbol for completion, wholeness, etc.

Maybe there’s a hearty soul among us that could, hearing the trespasser’s expression of repentance, pull off such a heroic effort. But, herein lies another of its challenges. How am I supposed to take the trespasser’s repentance seriously when he or she repeatedly trespasses against me—on the same day!? Why, if they were truly sorry and sincerely repentant this repeated trespassing wouldn’t be happening, would it? There would be a forsaking of the attitudes and actions that lead to the trespasses. Thus, we might conclude that their repentance is insincere and unworthy of a forgiving response.

And here is maybe the most difficult, infuriating, and unfair thing of all: Jesus does not consider or address the apparent insincerity of the “repentant” trespasser. It’s as though we and he are not supposed to care. Or is it that we have misunderstood what “sincere repentance” looks like. Maybe it is not in us to change on a dime—at least not often. Maybe it is in our nature to hold onto attitudes and actions that cause trespasses to proliferate, over and over and over again.

Maybe Jesus is calling on us to look into the mirror, see our repeated trespasses, and acknowledge that our brother or sister and us are the same, and deserve the same consideration. No wonder the apostles, astounded at Jesus’ insight and expectations, exclaimed, pleaded, “Increase our Faith.” “It is too much, what you are suggesting. We’ll need lots of help to pull this off!”

So, Jesus' expectation is difficult. Enough said about that. Let's get back to our original question: "Does Jesus practice what he preaches?" Do he and his Father forgive as they tell us to forgive? It is difficult to believe. In fact, it is as hard for us to believe that they forgive us with the consistency and generosity they counsel us to forgive others as it is for us to forgive as they ask! Upon hearing that they do follow their own advice, we might be forgiven for exclaiming: "Increase our faith."

So, there we go. Another item on our Lent "things-to-pray-about" list. Lent is a good time to explore with God the nature and extent of His own forgiveness. It is a good time to work to increase the nature and extent of our forgiveness toward others. It is a good time to plead with Almighty God, "Increase our faith."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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