

Jesus said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ²It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³Watch yourselves.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. ⁴Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

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

⁶The Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. ⁷Which one of you who has a servant plowing or taking care of sheep will say to him when he comes in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at the table'? ⁸Won't the master tell him instead, 'Prepare my supper, and after you are properly dressed, serve me while I eat and drink. After that you may eat and drink'? ⁹He does not thank the servant because he did what he was commanded to do, does he? ¹⁰So also you, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.' "

Being a servant does not sound appealing. We want self-determination and freedom. We don't want to bind our will to another's. But Jesus shows us that to be his servant is not a burden, but a blessing. Nothing he tells us to do will be easy. But Jesus fixes our attention on him to simplify it.

Jesus begins by saying, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Watch yourselves." The Lord gives a strong warning against tempting others into sin. And this can happen both purposely and by accident, can't it? The way you talk and act and even present yourself can lead people into sin. And even if you don't mean to do it, your refusal to think about how your actions influence others is a sin of selfishness. And what's the punishment for leading others into sin? You'd be so much better off drowning with a millstone around the neck. Does that not scare you? Jesus is not speaking in hyperbole here. He's speaking truth, raw and fear-inducing truth.

Jesus continues, "If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." His second command is to forgive. How easy is that? When our hearts want revenge? When we carry around bitterness? When every voice that we hear says "cut them off"? Don't pretend that these words don't scare you either. All of us can think of people we have struggled

to forgive, people who have cut our hearts so deeply, whether they used words or actual violence to attack us or our families. Jesus says forgive, and while he doesn't state the punishment for refusal to forgive, we know the wages of sin: death, hell.

This is why the disciples cry out, "Increase our faith!" They recognize these two simple commands from Jesus are too much for them. And this is where we find that following Jesus is not the path of ease, but of struggle against that sinful nature that still fights inside us like a guerrilla soldier.

I see way too much "I will follow Jesus my own way"-type living among people who claim to be his followers. I see high-profile athletes talk about their faith in God, only to read about how they dishonor God's gift of marriage and family by having a bunch of kids with a bunch of women. I see leaders of Christian churches who extoll all this virtue and godly living, then their emails and texts get leaked, and we find out it's all a sham and their sins have total control over them. I see Christians, young and old, who think hiding their sinful lifestyle from their pastor also means that God cannot see it. And I see in my own life plenty of times where God says, "do this," and instead I do that.

Following Jesus means taking what he says seriously. Because if you want to negotiate with Jesus and think he'll meet you halfway, you don't want to follow Jesus. You want to co-lead with Jesus and overrule him when what he asks doesn't jive with your sinful desires. What's the punishment for that attitude? Drowning in the fiery lake of sulfur with the weight of your sin tied around your neck.

Jesus is telling us to do something that we cannot do, to live perfect lives. And you can claim it's unfair. You can claim God set you up for failure. But God did not make you sinful. You did that. Your parents, Adam and Eve did that.

What's really unfair, though, is the solution. This sinful nature that is within us may still be fighting. And it certainly gets its way at times, each and every time we sin. And yet, the Lord calls us to daily contrition and repentance, to live out our baptisms, even if they may have taken place the better part of a century ago. Every moment, even as sin weighs on us, we get to make the claim, "I am God's child. Christ is my brother. I was buried with him into death, and I am made alive with him in his resurrection. Sin, you will not conquer me, because Jesus has conquered you for me. Be buried forever." And there is nothing we have done to deserve that privilege of saying goodbye to sin in Christ's forgiveness.

But the disciples do call for Jesus to increase their faith. And here is their mistake. They thought the solution was to improve their faith. Just a little more faith, and they could finally forgive others and keep from leading them into temptation. We think the same way: "If my faith were just a little stronger, I could finally be the person God demands me to be."

But Jesus offers correction: “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” The problem with the disciples and us, is that we still think about faith in some “leveling up” sort of way. “More faith and I can finally model an upright life for my kids.” “More faith and I can get to the point of forgiving that person who wronged me.” The truth Jesus makes clear is that a small amount of faith can accomplish incredible things, as long as the focus of that faith is not faith itself, but in him.

We fall into too much self-improvement talk. We treat our faith like we treat our hobbies, trying to perfect the art through hard work and dedication. But your faith is not strong because you come to church and read the scriptures. Your faith is not strong because you pray and help the poor. Because you know who else does that? Every other religion. But no matter how committed a Muslim is in her submission to God, her “faith” is powerless. No matter how sincere and careful a Jew is to keeping the law of the Torah and Talmud, his “faith” is worthless. Why? Because it’s not about how exercised your faith is. It’s about what the focus of your faith is. So, Jesus tells us that even with the faith of a mustard seed, that faith would be able to bring us to fulfill those commands Jesus gave before. Why? Because faith does not do the heavy lifting. The object of our faith, Jesus, does. And certainly, the attending church and reading the Bible and praying helps us grow closer to Jesus, but it’s not because of those things alone. It’s because of what those things focus on: Christ for us.

It is our faith in Jesus that allows us to live lives that don’t draw other people into sin, since he first lived that perfect life for us. It is our faith in Jesus that allows us to forgive even those who have wronged us deeply, because Christ forgave us through his death on the cross. “We love because he first loved us” is all about the focal point of our faith. If Jesus is not the focus of our faith, then it can’t do any of the heavy lifting Jesus is calling us to do here.

Jesus then paints the picture of what the Christian life looks like. We don’t serve God and ask, “What’s in it for me?” We don’t boast in doing what is required of us. We simply serve. We simply work in the various roles God has called us to. And at the end of each day, we say with the servants in Jesus’ parable, “We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.” That’s the attitude that flows from God’s grace. That’s how you feel and act when you know heaven was won for you 2,000 years ago, and now all that’s in front of you to accomplish is to thank God with your whole being. We use that term “servant” when we talk about our relationship with God, and that’s the same word God uses in the Bible. But, boy, does God treat his servants much better than any servant in this world. Certainly, he treats us better than we deserve. He gives us freedom, true and lasting freedom.

That's what service is in God's kingdom is. Our eyes are lifted away from ourselves, with all our weaknesses, failures, and efforts. And instead, they get fixed on Jesus, with his cross, his resurrection, and his Spirit working within us.

Nothing about discipleship is easy. Temptations are always around us. And forgiveness does not come naturally. But Jesus turns our eyes away from self and to him. And in him, we are free to live for him, to forgive as he forgives, and to serve him with all that has been entrusted to us. And we're not slaves in doing this. We are joyful and privileged servants. Servants of the Lord Jesus, who loved us first and most. Amen.