

Let's Get Real about Accountability

Luke 17:1-10

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Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, but He also called them to be in community with each other. Jesus wanted them, and us, to understand that the Christian life is not meant to be lived in solitude. Accountability is a vital element of our discipleship, our sanctification, and our service. Through three teachings, Jesus urges us to make accountability a vital part of our churches and our fellowship.

Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship who is now with the Lord, wrote that Christianity was never intended by God to be an individual, solitary belief system [but a community of believers following the truth of God's Word].

Charles Colson, *The Body* (Word Publishing, 1992), p. 32

The Bible never said, "There is safety in following your own counsel," it says, "There is safety in a multitude of counselors."

There is safety in accountability.

Belonging to a local church—a community of believers who have all placed our faith in the truth of God's Word—is something God has designed us for, to pull each other safely away from the undertow of our own pride, our own pursuits, our own innate desire to be unaccountable to anybody but me, myself and I.

When you first look at the opening verses of Luke chapter 17, they appear to be a series of random thoughts, stuck together in a disjointed conversation between Jesus and His disciples.

But the more you explore this passage, it's clear that the Holy Spirit, through Luke, has placed them together to highlight a common theme: the theme of accountability.

Elements of honesty, humility, and transparency are going to surface as well, but the connecting theme of personal accountability ties it all together.

And let me tell you, this is one of those passages where Jesus drops His gloves, so to speak; He doesn't hold back; He strikes at the hearts of His disciples with pointed words. It's as if the Lord is saying, "Let's get real about accountability."

What does accountability look like in the life of a believer? Jesus is about to show us three places where accountability needs to show up in your life and mine today.

First:

We are accountable to new believers to influence them correctly.

Now verse 1:

And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"

Luke 17:1

Your translation might read:

"Stumbling blocks will inevitably come, but woe to him through whom they come."

Temptation to sin—translated "stumbling blocks"—is from the Greek word *scandalon*, which gives us the word scandal.

There is always the threat of temptation and scandal. Be careful. Don't let your lifestyle set a trap for someone watching you; it could lead to their own disaster in life.

Marsha told me the other day she went out into the garage and saw a little field mouse disappear behind a box in the corner. So, I'm overdue in getting some more mousetraps.

Now I realize that some of you get those little cardboard boxes so you can trap them and take them back outside so they can come back in later—go ahead.

Not me; I get a wooden mouse trap with that yellow plastic thing they made to look like cheese; I put some peanut butter on that yellow thing because I want them to enjoy their last meal!

Well that little yellow thing with peanut butter on it is the *scandalon*; it springs the trap.

It's innocent looking, it's inviting; it seems fun, it's popular; it's legal, so it must be alright. Besides, somebody you highly respect is telling you that peanut butter is good for you. It has protein. Everybody eats it.

And to a new naive believer, it might bring serious consequences.

Jesus doesn't specifically mention what that little yellow thing is—that stumbling block, and frankly, the list would be long—His point here is leading us to own up to our personal responsibility.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you are personally responsible for your influence on other people?

Adapted from David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p 679

We're not just living for ourselves; no man or woman is an island. I hear people all the time talking about being true to themselves; well your truth might be devastating to your family, your marriage, or someone else's life.

Have you ever thought about the fact that God designed us to influence each other? To guide each other? Another word for that is discipleship.

Older believers have a responsibility to say, "Follow me!"

This is the apostle Paul writing, ***"Be imitators of me as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).***

This is Hebrews 13:7 exhorting us to "Remember our leaders ... and imitate their faith."

Today, we have in the social media world a growing number of people who are called "influencers." Their profession is posting their lives, their opinions, their thoughts, and their skills online.

Imagine the significance of this question: "What do you do for a living?" "I influence people."

But can you imagine the judgment on influencers for having influenced people to sin, to deny a Creator God, to pursue their own truth, to choose their own moral standard, to basically live for themselves?

Do you really want to be an influencer? Let me tell you, as far as Jesus is concerned, you are one.

You might not have a million followers, but you happen to have more than you realize. It could be a child, a friend, a classmate, a student, a neighbor, a coworker, a competitor.

You have no idea who's watching you, but someone is.

Jesus is saying here to get real about accountability in life: accept it and be careful with it.

“Don't allow yourself to become a danger to someone else.”

Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 404

The stakes are too high.

In fact, Jesus goes on to warn, here in verse 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.”

Luke 17:2

The words here for ***little ones*** can refer to new believers taking their first steps as they begin to walk with God; they are highly influenced by older believers.

But *little ones* can also be applied in general to influencing the young. Little ones are pliable and trusting by nature; they are easily led.

Think of the responsibility then:

- of television and social media producers;
- authors of both textbooks and fiction;
- experts in their fields who blog;
- elementary school teachers;
- college professors who put a stumbling block of unbelief or skepticism;
- school leaders on all levels who encourage dishonorable behavior and immoral choices, who pave the pathways for young people to think it's safe to sin.

Adapted from, Bruce B. Barton, [Life Application Bible: Luke](#) (Tyndale House, 1997), p. 1997

For those who use their position of influence to cause people to end up trapped in sin, Jesus uses a rather graphic illustration to get the seriousness of His point across:

Again, Jesus says in verse 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.”



A millstone weighed hundreds of pounds. Nobody would have thought of tying it around the neck of the worst criminal in the land and then dumping them in the lake.

That would be a horrifying way to die.

Jesus effectively says that it would be better to die that kind of horrific death than be guilty of leading a little one—a new believer or a little child—astray.

Judgment day is coming! You better be careful what you're teaching the little ones.

Now maybe you came today, and you were thinking about volunteering to teach Sunday School and now you're not so sure!

No; go for it! But don't treat it lightly; live with a sense of holy fear that you could lead someone astray.

William Barclay wrote of his friend, Kennedy Williamson, who as an old man had a lingering regret. He told Barclay about the time when he was a boy, he often played on a common area in town. Near the field was an intersection and an old rickety signpost. Kennedy said, "I remember one day twisting it around so that the arms of the signpost pointed in the wrong direction; I wonder, even to this day, what I might have done to others; how many I sent traveling down the wrong road."

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 216

Which way does your lifestyle, and your influence point people when they meet you at the intersections of life?

Jesus wants us all to have this sense of responsibility; **we are accountable to new believers to influence them correctly.**

Secondly:

We are accountable to fellow believers to forgive them graciously.

Now verse 3:

“Pay attention 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, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

Luke 17:3-4

The idea here of ***paying attention to yourselves*** is the idea of mutual accountability. Watching over each other. This illustration can go both ways.

Now in this illustration, the Lord has His disciples imagine that someone is sinning against them personally.

Their tendency—and ours—is to feel hurt, perhaps nurse a grudge, develop resentment, and then tell others what happened to us.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Courageous* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 50

The truth is, it’s easier to talk behind someone’s back than it is face to face.

Garland, p. 680

It might be natural to think, “Well, forget them! I have no responsibility to that person. What do I have to do with correcting what they did?”

Am I my brother’s keeper?

And Jesus says, “Yes! You are. They’re in danger with, perhaps, that pattern of sin; it’s against you for now, but it will affect many more later.”

So here’s what Jesus says to do; verse 3 again:

“If your brother sins (implied: against you), rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him ...”

The word ***rebuke*** here means to call attention to wrongdoing and provide a warning.

Swindoll, p. 407

Now this doesn’t mean that your new mission in life is to look for someone to rebuke. Rebuking people isn’t a spiritual gift. We’re not on the lookout for sins, we’re on the lookout for solutions.

Now notice: Jesus says here, ***and if he repents, forgive him***. *If*—circle that—he repents, forgive him.

So, keep that in mind when you think you’re supposed to forgive someone who hasn’t asked you for forgiveness. You might do more harm than good if you put the cart before the horse.

If they are unrepentant, you might ask God to forgive them, which Jesus did on the cross and Stephen did while being stoned to death; they both said, “Father, forgive them.”

They literally handed their abusers over to God. So instead of remaining a victim over and over again, you hand them over to God, as it were, and now it’s between them and God.

And by the way, God Himself will not forgive sinners unless they **repent**. The word **repent** in this context means to change the mind rather than defend the sin.

Many believers today—even churches—are forgiving anybody and everybody even when they’ve never repented.

I hear church leaders confessing the sins of America and asking God to forgive America. Well God isn’t going to forgive America because America isn’t asking God for forgiveness.

Furthermore, nations don’t repent, individuals repent. People repent. The Ninevites repented as individuals, from the king on down, and the nation of Nineveh was spared.

Wake County doesn’t repent; my neighborhood HOA doesn’t repent, even though they keep raising the fees. People in my neighborhood and in my county can repent.

So, what happens if someone sins against you and they respond to your kind rebuke and they repent? Jesus says here, again, in **verse 3**:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him ...”

Okay, fair enough—I’ll do that.

But Jesus isn’t finished; here’s what real accountability means to your brother in Christ; **verse 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.”

Luke 17:4

Forgive him seven times in the same day. Who in the world would do that?

God.

Aren’t you glad God isn’t keeping count?

Jesus is saying that “forgiveness is not to be a unique experience but an ongoing practice.”

No wonder then, here in **verse 5**:

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to the mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Luke 17:5-6

In other words, you have to trust God to accomplish in you this impossible spirit of forgiveness.

Now you might have expected the disciples to have responded to the Lord here in **verse 5**, “Lord, increase our love. We’re going to have to really love people to be able to forgive them like this.”

No doubt, love is part of this equation, but it will take faith in Jesus to forgive people. Why?

Well, the word for forgive is literally, “to release.”

Swindoll, p. 407

When you forgive, you are releasing everything as you trust God:

- to take care of the consequences;
- to handle the misunderstandings;
- to take care of your reputation;
- to determine your own vindication;
- to work everything out for your good and His glory.

Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 51

And the apostle’s got the point: it will take faith—even the smallest of faith—in the greatness of God.

We are accountable to new believers to influence them correctly.

We are accountable to fellow believers to forgive them graciously.

Now the third illustration from the Lord is this:

We are accountable to the Lord Jesus to serve Him willingly.

Verse 7:

“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 recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 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.’”

Luke 17:7-10

I want to pull over for a moment and address something here that gives theological liberals an opportunity to try and prove—especially to college freshmen—that Jesus and the Bible endorses slavery and thus neither one can be trusted.

When you see the word ‘servant’ or ‘slave,’ we immediately think of that evil era in our own country’s history where people of all ages were stolen away from their homes and then sold into slavery. The Hebrew and Greek words for that practice can be translated “man-stealing.”

Swindoll, p. 408

But the Old Testament and the New Testament condemned that practice; God might have recorded it in Scripture, but He never endorsed it.

In fact, God condemned man-stealing—selling people into slavery—as a crime worthy of the death penalty.

Back in **Exodus 21:16**, God’s law demanded:

“Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”

Exodus 21:16

Simple as that.

Then over in the New Testament book of **1 Timothy 1**, Paul describes ungodly people who violate the law of God, and right in the middle of the list is the word **“enslaver” or “man-stealer” in verse 10**. God calls it an abomination.

That practice was never supported by God, but it continues today in other parts of the world. Christians in several countries today have been taken from their homes and sold into slavery. And God is going to bring judgment one day.

Now there were other types of slaves or servants in the first century. We know from Mark 1:10 that the apostles James and John, along with their father Zebedee, had a fishing business and Mark writes that they had **“hired servants.”**

You might think of them more accurately as employees. These servants were not free Roman citizens, but like millions of others in the Roman Empire, they could own their own homes, and raise their own families. Many of them in the Roman Empire were physicians, lawyers, teachers, and laborers.

In rural areas especially, servants might be adopted into the family and live on their master’s property and serve the household or the farm; they would be given room and board in exchange, as members of the family.

And that’s the individual described here in the Lord’s illustration. You’ll notice that he’s both the farm hand and the cook.

Kenneth E. Bailey, [Poet & Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes](#) (Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), p. 115

Now according to this illustration here, he’s been working out in the field until the meal, and this meal was the late afternoon meal.

Jesus describes a scene here that was common to emphasize this point: This servant comes in from the field and would never expect to be thanked for ploughing all day or told to relax in the lazy boy while the master prepares the servant’s dinner. No, that’s his job too.

Jesus is effectively asking His disciples: what are your expectations for serving your Master? Are you going to serve Him because He thanks you, or makes it easy for you? Because He gives you a soft seat and room service?

Or will you serve God, verse 10 says, because it is your duty?

Oh, American ears especially don’t like the sound of that at all.

We need to discuss this with:

- the labor unions and confirm 40 hours a week;
- and time-and-a-half for overtime pay;
- and sick days and benefit packages;
- and vacation days and maternity leave;
- and national holidays and year-end bonuses.

Wait! You mean Jesus is expecting us to be accountable to Him as our master and it is our duty to serve Him?

You mean my reward is that I got to serve Him? Yes!

And that is reward enough.

Oh yes, we know from Scripture that God is going to reward us magnificently. We have a place in the Kingdom of Christ; we are His Son's bride and one day we will be robed in glorious splendor.

But this text balances us with the declaration that we are His servants still.

This passage challenges us to come to terms with real accountability:

It's time to examine our lifestyles. Are we leading younger believers toward holy living, or do we endanger them?

It's time to examine our spirit. is it rare that we forgive others, or is it repeated with grace?

It's time to examine our expectations for serving the Lord. Is the privilege of serving Him reward enough?

What about Luke? Well, he evidently took the Lord's advice.

He was a physician before his conversion, when he left his practice and began traveling, in his mid-50s, with Paul and Silas. He would be shipwrecked with Paul on the island of Malta; he would serve Paul as Paul endured imprisonment in Rome.

After Paul's death, Luke traveled to Boeotia, in central Greece where he wrote two best-selling books: The Gospel of Luke and The Book of Acts. In them, he rarely, if ever, mentioned himself.

An edition of the Bible, found in the second century, has a preface to the Gospel of Luke that reads: "Having neither wife nor children, Luke served the Lord faithfully until he fell asleep in Boeotia, at the age of 84, full of the Holy Spirit."

Accountable to the end, to new believers; to fellow believers, and to Jesus, his Master and Lord.

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