

**Luke 17:1-10****Life Together****Recorded 11/12/20, Preached Live 11/15/20**

We are picking up in Luke 17 today.

One of the greatest blessings and privileges of the Christian life is the Christian community. Christ-centered relationships with other Christians. It's our "Life Together" as Bonhoeffer called it.

And in his book, Life Together, Bonhoeffer points out how much we take for granted the ability to gather on Sundays, take the Lord's Supper together, hear the word taught together. It is a gift, and a gift that at times isn't given to Christians or is taken away from them.

One of the many difficulties of this pandemic has been our separation from each other - about half of us gather on Sundays, our groups are sometimes sparse, people are rightly being cautious about gatherings and meetings in homes and restaurants, and there has been unnatural distance created between us in many ways.

And this has been detrimental. Distance can breed suspicion and distrust, failure to participate in Christ-centered togetherness opens us up to drift from Christ, there are all kinds of problems caused by loneliness and isolation or existing only in the false community of social media.

And we know that there may be some more weeks when we won't have services due to virus spikes and our desire not to be part of the problem of spreading it. So it may mean for us some more time away from the Christian community as we've known it in the past this winter.

Times like that have not been rare for Christians in history. We just take for granted that all Christians have what we have.

Bonhoeffer writes, *“It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.*

*Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.*

*The measure with which God bestows the gift of visible community is varied. The Christian in exile is comforted by a brief visit of a Christian brother, a prayer together and a brother's blessing; indeed, he is strengthened by a letter written by the hand of a Christian. The greetings in the letters written with Paul's own hand were doubtless tokens of such community. Others are given the gift of common worship on Sundays...”*  
*Dietrich Bonhoeffer - [Life Together](#)*

So for the first time in many of our lives, the gift of Christian community hasn't been as consistent as we've always known it to be. And we feel the lack there.

But even when we have full access to the Christian community, we can miss out on its benefits and even be destructive to it.

In this next section of Luke, we are given a collection of Jesus's teachings, and one undercurrent that seems to run under all of the teachings in this section is that they all have to do with life in the Christian community - life with other Christians. They set up our expectations and what will be required of us to make Christian community thrive and to derive the maximum benefit from it.

First, he shatters any utopian notion of Christian togetherness that we might have:

**Luke 17:1 “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 were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.**

So Jesus starts by saying sin is sure to come into our life together.

It's sure to.

So in case you are tempted to think that small groups and Christian families and Christian friendships and Christian churches will be heaven on earth, Jesus shatters that notion right up front and says sin will still be there.

There will be sins, and temptations to sin. The Christian community will always be rocked and ravaged by selfishness and disobedience to God. And anyone who has been part of a church for long enough has experienced a season of really devastating sin.

Not only will we have weaknesses and disagreements and disappointments and an inability to see eye to eye. But there will be lies, divisions, arrogance, broken friendships, broken trust, corrupt leaders, gossip, betrayal, adultery - - until Jesus returns and perfects is.

True Christian community is always flawed Christian community. True church is always flawed church. It is sure to be that way.

And if we always assume that flawed community is false community, we will never experience true Christian community.

Now in case we might want to say, "Well it's always going to be that way, so I'll just not be on guard against my own sin, and I won't worry too much about making negative contributions to the community," Jesus says, "No - don't think that way. It would be better to have a millstone around your neck and thrown into the sea than be the source of sin that hurts a "little one" or a young, naive, immature Christian.

This reality doesn't excuse anything. Jesus warns of real punishment for the ones who bring sin into the community, especially when it does damage to the naive.

There have been so many times when people come to the faith, come to the church with admittedly naive notions of what church will be, but then they are shocked to be met with real evil. Someone uses the church or a church office to abuse. Someone uses their naivety against them to tempt them. Someone preys on them. Someone uses their humility and trust for Christians to take advantage.

And so many have never recovered a vital faith after having collided with evil in a surprising place. So bringing sin into the community is a big deal. Jesus says it would be

better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around your neck than be the source of such a thing. There is real judgment coming for those that bring it. But, they will bring it.

Wvil people sneak into Christian community and do all kinds of evil. Jesus said it will be that way. And knowing that can keep us from doing damage to Christian community ourselves by imposing on it what Bonhoeffer called a “wish-dream,” or an expectation that Christian community must be utopia or it isn’t Christian community at all.

He wrote, *“Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse. Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial. ... He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.”* Dietrich Bonhoeffer - [Life Together](#)

The Christian community is a gift from God, but not a utopia, and we shouldn’t demand that it be one. If we do, we will miss out on Christian community.

Beware of believing that the flaws that you find in the Christian community are evidence that it is a false community. Beware of waiting to find a community without sin and weakness before you will commit to one. Beware of finding the place where everyone agrees with you on everything before you'll commit.

I've had a number of friends with Utopian visions go out to plant churches. And inevitably sin comes there too. They strive to be holy, as they should, but they expect perfection in the community. And it never comes.

There was a time that MARTIN Luther went into the monastery to get away from all the sin out there, and he ended up saying "but that rascal came with me." It was in him and with him, so obviously it would go where he went.

And if we must find a place without the presence of that rascal sin, we will never know *life together*. I know of a guy who is well-meaning, but as soon as he sees faults and flaws within a church, he leaves and looks for another, and tells the people in the next one how bad the last one was. A pattern he has followed for decades. And he's one of the most arrogant people I've ever met - he points out the flaws and keeps his distance, but he has been so proud and unapproachable that the very sin he's trying to get away from is growing in him, and without anyone who can speak into his life because nobody is worthy, he just can't see it.

If you believe a flawed community is a false community, you will never experience the benefits of community.

So expect to see sin within the church, that doesn't make it a false church.

But also expect to be actively engaged in helping with it, and being helped with your sins:

**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."**

So here Jesus lays out a radical call for our life together. It's a call to watch out for one another, confront one another where necessary (which means to be very open to what people bring us when we're confronted), and then radical forgiveness when a person repents.

So Jesus says that if a Christian sins, they should be confronted.

Now we know that in one sense we are sinning all the time. In thoughts, in motives. So Jesus can't be calling for a judgmental community where we're waiting to pounce and pouncing at every opportunity.

**1 Peter 4:8 “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”**

Not every word spoken in a moment of anger or grief needs to be corrected, not every suspicion of someone needs to be addressed. In love, we do cover a multitude of sins.

But if it is covered, it has to really be covered. If it is small enough to be covered in love, then it really is covered and we won't bring it up in any context, it won't be brought up later or saved for later. And we need to have a category for people who do things we disagree with, or sin in small rare ways, and we cover those over in love knowing we need people to do the same for us. We bear with one another, we're patient with one another, we aren't a nit-picky demanding community.

But if it is large enough that it can't be let go like that, we should sit face-to-face, one-on-one, not through email or social media, and directly talk about it.

We have invented a third category that scripture doesn't allow: sins in our brothers and sisters that are too big to cover in love, but which we won't confront to their face.

So we tattle to pastors first, or gossip first, or post passive-aggressive shots at them on social media, or cancel them: no face-to-face conversation, but it can't be ignored. And that approach to sin is sin itself.

In CS Lewis's book *The Last Battle*, King Tyrian says, “No warrior scolds. Courteous words or else hard knocks are his only language.”

We cover sins in love, or we have the hard one-on-one, face to face conversation. We don't become social media scolds or gossipy and divisive. We don't run from community without making the hard face-to-face efforts first.

Now here's a caution. Some of the people who would use Christianity to do evil will weaponize forgiveness. Particularly in cases of abuse - they sin horribly against a person

and use the command to forgive to silence a person. But notice that Jesus says if they repent, forgive them.

But to repent is to accept all of the consequences of your actions. That would mean crimes, for example, are brought to the authorities and there is due process - and a repentant person welcomes that. A repentant person turns himself in, accepts that his particular sins could bring unique consequences including removal from that community and all the legal consequences. They could mean that that person won't be in any relationship with the people he has wronged.

So a person hasn't repented until they accept the full consequences of their actions, so don't allow forgiveness commands to be weaponized to keep victims quiet. With some sins, the only evidence they've repented is they head to jail.

But having made that qualification, we can't get away from Jesus's radical demand here.

The Christian community is to be characterized by repeated and consistent forgiveness for one another again and again and again.

To be a Christian is first and foremost to be forgiven by God. The Gospel we cling to says I was hopeless as a sinner, but Jesus died for me. He was put to death on the cross for my sins. My sins could not be excused. They were not small. They had to be paid for. And Jesus paid for them.

And that view of self is at the core of every single Christian.

Which must make us gracious, kind, forgiving people. Otherwise we are forgetting the Gospel. Lewis wrote, *"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."*

Becoming a Christian radically changes the way we relate to other people, particularly to those who have wronged us because we see ourselves as the ones who have wronged God and needed forgiveness.

**Ephesians 4:32 says, <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."**

The question we should ask is, "How does God forgive us?" If we're supposed to forgive others like God forgave us, what should our forgiveness look like?

**He never holds our sin against us – so we should never hold the sins of others against them.**

He doesn't pretend our sins don't exist – he pays the price for them, asks us to confess them, and then when we do, they are no longer held against us. So don't say you've forgiven someone if you plan on bringing their past sins out to use against them at a future time. Their sins are GONE.

**He goes out of his way to restore relationship and we should do the same**

Now again, sins like physical abuse, when repented of, mean that you understand you likely shouldn't have that relationship - it means accepting that you ruined it.

But with outside of sins that necessitate the dissolution of a relationship, we are called to work to restore relationships. This is hard and inconvenient and not at all what we want to do. I would say Jesus dying on the cross was inconvenient for him, it was out of his way, but he went through all of it to restore relationship. So being a merciful forgiving person means you work hard to reconcile with people. You go to them to restore the relationship.

You seek them out as Jesus sought you out.

**John 15:16 “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.”**

Jesus took the initiative, he came to us, he worked to restore relationship with us, actively pursued us while we were yet sinners. And we should do the same.

And if we are never going to someone we don't want to go to to try to restore the relationship, we are not living in obedience to this. So this means that maybe the relationship with a Christian that you broke online during the election season by calling them a Nazi or a socialist would be a good place to start - face-to-face, drinking a coffee, with a posture of humility.

Now we might ask, “what if they really did sin against me and really won't repent. Do I have to forgive?”

Well, for full forgiveness to happen, it has to be a two way street. Forgiveness is like a gift you give to someone, and they have to unwrap it to receive it by repenting.

So if they don't receive it by repenting, full forgiveness hasn't happened, which is not



your fault.

But your posture should still be the posture of wrapping the gift and leaving it there for them. It shouldn't be bitterness, punishing them in every way you can, cancelling them with no remedy. Grace makes you gracious.

And we can become very defensive: I just don't want to be wronged and have people get away with it, so I'm going to be slow to forgive.

But if we understand grace, we don't first say, "I will never allow myself to be mistreated." We first think, "I will never allow myself not to be merciful and forgiving and gracious."

I will never allow myself to be a facebook scold, I will not grow bitter, I will not be an accuser of Christians day and night (that's Satan's job, according to the book of Revelation.) I will forgive.

So the apostles respond to this hard teaching:

### **Luke 17:5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"**

If this feels like a particularly hard teaching for you, it did for them as well. They heard this and thought, "I don't have enough faith for that."

They were living in a shame and honor culture, where if somebody offended you or insulted you, you had to defend your name. You had to nail them - your dignity depended upon it. It was expected that you'd punish them, or sue them, or fight them, or make them an enemy.

Jesus, counterculturally, says, "Forgive them." And they say, "I don't believe that much. I'm not that much of a Christian."

Which is similar to what we do when we participate in the cancel culture. Jesus says, "Forgive!" and we say, "But my virtue comes by finding fault and never forgiving, and inciting a twitter mob to do the same."

Jesus says, "No, forgive." And we say, "Maybe some Christians can, but I'm not that Christian - not enough faith here."

So they say, "If you increase our faith, make us super-Christians, then we can do this."

So Jesus replies:

**Luke 17:6 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.**

Sometimes we'll read this verse as, "If you muster up more faith, then you can do miraculous things."

But Jesus here says, "If you have the smallest amount of faith - tiny faith, that actually works!" So it isn't how much faith we have (faith isn't a substance - it's an empty hand that embraces Christ.) It's whether we have faith at all.

Faith is strong not because of its quantity, but because of its object. Because of who we have faith in.

And true faith in Christ will always have life-changing affect, particularly when it comes to forgiveness. I can't believe that I was an enemy of God and a sinner desperately hopeless and in need of a rescue, and then not forgive others.

It's not that I need to be a super-Christian to have the power to forgive. I just need to be a Christian. To be a Christian at all is to be made a gracious forgiving person.

We don't need elite faith to live this way. We just need to believe the gospel.

And then, when we do forgive when someone has wronged us deeply, when our lives look absolutely extraordinary because we're now sharing meals with people that insulted us, building love where before there was hate, persevering with one another when we don't understand each other, enduring frustration with brothers and sisters rather than creating disunity, being insulted but not insulting back, that will be noticed. That will look like absolutely remarkable lives.

**Luke 17:7 "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'? 8 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'? 9 Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 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.'"**

We might think that forgiveness is for extraordinary, huge faith Christians. We might think the forgiveness we have extended to others is remarkable - above and beyond. But Jesus says here that it is just our basic job.

If you're a school bus driver, and you come in after working your shift and tell your supervisor, "I went above and beyond today, I would like a raise."

So he asks, "Why's that?"

And you say, "Today, I got all the kids home. 100%. Nobody is left on the bus right now. Everybody is home. They all got dropped off at the right place."

Your supervisor would say, "I'm waiting for you to describe the above and beyond part. You did your job, that's good and all, but doing the basics of your job isn't extraordinary."

So Jesus is saying that forgiving, radically, is not the work of the extraordinary Christian. It's what you do if you're a Christian at all.

The basic job of Christians, as forgiven people, is to be forgiving people.

The basic evidence of having received forgiveness is that we extend it.

**Matthew 6:11-15 "Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."**

**Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."**

The gospel has a million affects on our lives, but the least that it does in us is it makes us merciful forgiving people.

And if we are - if we are humbled by the gospel and made gracious by the gospel - we can be cultivators of real Christian community. Not wish-dream Christian community.

We will be real church members, not consumers that always shop for the shiniest new church product, not people with leaving on a hair-trigger, but pillars who stay and love and forgive, and disagree but invest and walk with each other. Who know we have our own issues that need to be corrected and forgiven, that “they” are not the only ones with blind spots. And who appreciate the grace that all of that is.

And if I could just close by looking at one passage. As we worship God, we become more like him. So listen to what this passage says God is like, and the affect that it has on his people:

**Isaiah 30:18-22 “18 Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.**

Now we might say, “God is a God of justice, therefore he waits to smite you. He’s ready to nail you.”

But this says God is a God of justice, so he is waiting to show mercy. (To forgive!) Which is no injustice because Jesus paid for our sin.

And God is waiting to be gracious, exalting (being thrilled!) to show mercy.

**Isaiah 30:19-22 For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. 20 And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 21 And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. 22 Then you will defile your carved idols overlaid with silver and your gold-plated metal images. You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, “Be gone!”**

So God disciplines, he corrects with the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, but all of it is in an eagerness to show mercy. And he gently instructs his people. And the result is tht they shatter their idols.

The kindness of God leads us to repentance, scripture says. And as his sons and daughters, we are called to be kind and merciful and quick to forgive, patiently instructing one another, in the confidence that that kind of love and mercy and grace so softens a heart that we want to repent, we want to turn from other gods and other ultimates, we want to chuck our idols because the grace that we've experienced is so much better.

And now this weekend, it looks like the spike in COVID could lead to another season of distance from the full gathered community in the weeks ahead, we aren't sure yet (at the time of this recording at least on Thursday November 12th). Which for some is a cause for anger, for some fear, for some disagreement about when to meet or not. But let's apply this stuff - let's exercise grace when we disagree, let's trust that God is good, let's double our efforts at Christian relationships as we can have them (one one one, letters, service for each other). Let's cultivate an appreciation for the gift of our life together, and come back from it all, as Bonhoeffer says, thanking God on our knees for the gift of Christian community that He has given us.

Whatever the weeks ahead hold, we know that God is waiting to show mercy to us. Maybe with the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, but it's all to teach us. It's all his kindness to get us to drop our idols, to drop consumer church-shopping Christianity, to drop our need for control, and to learn, again, grace.