

Well, I must begin this morning with some repentance and confession. A few weeks ago, while we were talking about living out our faith publicly in a world opposed to it, I illustrated it by telling you of a time I, a Bears fan, went to a Bears/Cowboys game and made my sport loyalties very clear. To begin that story, though, I told you my youngest son Joe was headed to the Cowboys game that afternoon. There was one problem, though. After service, Joe came up to me and rebuked me by saying “Dad, you just lied to your entire congregation! I’m not going to the game. I’m going to a birthday party where we’ll watch the game.” Then my other son, Luke, said “Yeah dad. And they are not even playing at home. They’re playing in Los Angeles!” Whoops. I’m so thankful my boys chose to engage me and set me back on the right path.

So, two things: First, I was wrong, and confess that. Second, I did not charter a plane to fly my son to Los Angeles after church to catch the game. I don’t want you sitting there thinking “How much are we paying this guy?”

Now, that’s a funny story, but it illustrates a way of life that is hard to live by but necessary if we want to faithfully follow Jesus. Our walk with Jesus is not always a smooth and straight path. The road is full of potholes, giant rocks, and tempting detours we all struggle with from time to time. If we try to go it alone, it becomes nearly impossible. That’s why God has given us one another to walk it together, but to do so comes at a cost.

Today we finish our series called *Worth the Cost*. This morning Jesus is going to ask us to pay the cost of vulnerability and interdependency, that to live the life he has for us, we must be open to the input and influence of others who have permission to speak into our lives and call us back to following him. It is a high cost to pay, but Jesus tells us it will be worth it.

[Luke 17:1-4] 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. 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.”

Jesus is addressing disciples. This is instruction for those within the Church and it is one of the foundational practices of the community of believers dedicated to righteousness and faithfulness.

In our walk with Jesus, everyone stumbles.

We are redeemed sinners living in a sinful world, and sometimes we will sin. Jesus uses the word *skandalon* that gets translated as “temptations to sin” but literally means “cause for stumbling” or “stumbling block”. In other words, the one who says, “follow me” is also saying “but know that sometimes you will trip”. It won’t be a smooth ride. All of us will face temptations and stumble.

It's so important that we see why Jesus starts here. Before he tells us how to be intimately involved in each other’s lives, he levels the playing field and defines the context of our relationship. He tells us nobody is perfect, we are all desperately in need of the cross, no one is better than anyone else. Given that, go work it out together as equals.

This does two things. First, it eradicates self-righteousness. There can be no superiority or boasting. **While there are different levels of maturity, no one can say they have it all together.** It also gives us freedom to be open and honest about our struggles. Think about what sin causes us to do. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve introduce sin into the world, they see they are exposed, feel shame, cover themselves, hide, and blame. We are so self-protective around our shortcomings because we don't want anyone to see us for who we really are. We're confident we'll be judged and rejected. But, if we are all operating from the same place of desperation and redemption by God's grace alone, we have nothing to hide. We can come to one another and say "Oh, you too?" That's why Alcoholics Anonymous is so effective because there you confess your helplessness and find others who are going through the same thing as you.

If we approach each other with this truth and open ourselves up to the spiritual influence of others, what Jesus says can be possible. But as we exercise that influence, Jesus warns us to be watchful.

In our walk with Jesus, we can cause others to fall or flourish.

Jesus warns us to pay attention to ourselves because our spiritual influence can be used for evil and to the spiritual detriment of another. He says it would be better for a millstone to be tied around our neck and have us thrown into the sea than us leading another to sin. Hear that clearly. Jesus would rather you be dead than bring someone else down with you.

Do you share Jesus' attitude towards sin? We rightly proclaim the gospel that when you trust in Christ you are forgiven for all your sins past, present, future, and we rest in that. But it doesn't change the fact that Jesus still hates your sin, the wages of sin is still death. Sin still disobeys and dishonors God, perpetuates evil in the world, and makes us spiritually weak. I just read we are in the most active flu season in the last 13 years (because of course we are). Sin gives us spiritual flu-like symptoms that prevent us from glorifying and following Christ.

Every person is responsible for their own sin, but we can influence others to do so. We can be like a workout partner who constantly tempts someone not to go to the gym or have a cheat day four times a week. That may be things like adding or taking away from the gospel or influencing doubt and disbelief. If you say, "I'd never do that", there are more subtle ways: gossip, sexual sin, worry, slander, discontentment, covetousness. That stuff is sneaky and pervasive, so Jesus tells us to be careful because he takes it so seriously.

Jesus wants us to do the opposite of that. We are to be partners and advocates for righteousness in each other's lives. We are given to one another to help each other follow faithfully, to move the rocks of stumbling out of each other's way, warn of potholes, pull back on track when we ever start to drift.

Jesus tells us if we see our brother or sister sinning, we are to rebuke them, and if he repents, we are to forgive him. Now, let's be honest. Rebuke doesn't sound like a fun word. Any word that sounds that close to "puke" can't be good right? So what does the word mean? Admonish, warn, disapprove, for the sake of calling back. It is intensely personal, requires courageous vulnerability and courageous confrontation, but it is vital. All of us sometimes struggle to see where we are stumbling, or willfully do so, and need a voice to pursue and call us back.

This past week Martha engaged a friend of hers in something she saw in her life that wasn't aligned with what God has for her. So she prayed about it and then talked to her friend about it. She did it lovingly, she spoke truthfully, and she was heard. At the end Martha said "I hope I didn't offend you by saying that." The friend replied "No, I'm so glad you brought that to my attention. That's what the Body of Christ is for. Thank you for saying something." It won't always go that well, but that is the redemptive potential of what Jesus is asking of us.

But many of us have the theology of *nunya*, as in "nunya business". We realize the risk that goes with the level of knowing, mutuality, trust, exposure, and are not really interested in it. We hear the word "rebuke" and think shaming condemnation. If it was that, Jesus wouldn't be asking us to do it. So how can we live in this way while honoring Christ's intent?

Rules for Rebuking:

Restorative not punitive: We are not the Jesus police, and Jesus isn't asking us to go around trying to bust each other in our sin. We don't rebuke because we like to get people in trouble. We rebuke because we desire to see the other turn from their sin, seek forgiveness, and walk free and refreshed in the grace of God. An old preacher said someone burdened by unconfessed sin is like a soldier running through the battlefield with his pants around his ankles. It won't go very well. Rebuke is a loving call for someone to turn back to God. We are to do it prayerfully, gently, humbly, privately, and invitationally. Our refrain should be "I am for you".

In the context of relationship: This is not permission for you to confront a stranger on the concourse after service. If you see a brother...this is a family affair, and we are to do this in relationship with those we know and have earned the right to speak boldly into their lives.

You go first: We wouldn't want to listen to a smoker tell us we need to stop smoking. It's the same with sin. We all stumble, but we have to have our own life of repentance before we can ask it of others, and we have to be open and honest about our own sin before we engage others. **The more you own your stuff in community, the more you make it safe for others to own theirs.** It's why I try to tell on myself from the pulpit as much as I can. It's not because I love talking about my sin. It's in the hope of, if I go first, God might use that to encourage you to live it out in community. Vulnerability and the pursuit of righteousness are contagious and unifying. We are drawn to someone who has the humility to say, "I don't have it all together and I need your help." In fact, in *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer says confession is the "breakthrough" to fellowship. That when we get real with each other about our struggles, the distance between us closes and our lives are knitted together. And it starts with you.

Never via text: Ever.

With the default posture of forgiveness: We are heralds of the gospel to each other. We are ministers of reconciliation. When a brother or sister repents and confesses their sin, we offer them the forgiveness we know they have been given by God. We remind them Christ has paid for it and God hears their confession. How many people do you know who are still stuck in sin they have offered up in confession to God. They are still paying for what God says is paid in full. Our ministry is to preach the gospel to one another all the time.

But what happens if that sin is against us? This is the hardest part. I want to show you how hard. We can talk of God's forgiveness for others, but what if our forgiveness is also being asked for? When it's difficult, remember this: Your sin required the Son of God to be crucified in order to pay for it and make forgiveness possible. And **if God did not withhold his own Son in order to forgive you, who are we to try to withhold it ourselves.** We have been forgiven much and should be eager to forgive, even if it's not asked for, because we love one another and want the best for each other. When we are in it together, we will follow more faithfully.