

Trampling on Flowers**Luke 17:1-4**

A little boy was once asked his definition of forgiveness. After a moment of thinking he said that forgiveness is the odor that flowers breathe when they are trampled on.”

I think that’s as good a definition as there is.

In our passage Jesus is continuing His dialogue that began in chapter 15 at a dinner invitation given by a Pharisee. In chapter 17 He is addressing the disciples with instructions on the ministry that they will continue, but He has in mind the Scribes and Pharisees who also are present. In Matthew 23 He said the religious leaders were blind leaders of the blind meaning that what they were teaching was wrong and they were leading others in the wrong spiritual direction. Second, it’s directed to the Pharisees because of what they believed and taught regarding forgiveness.

This morning I want to suggest two points:

A word about false teachers

A word about forgiveness

I. A WORD ABOUT FALSE TEACHERS – v. 1-2

There are three thoughts I want to convey.

A. The Propensity to Commit Sin – v. 1a

“Jesus said to His disciples: ‘Things that cause people to sin are bound to come...’”

That seems quite obvious to us doesn’t it. Sinning comes naturally and before the sin comes the temptation. Your translation may have the word stumbling block. They are the things that can easily trip us up, cause us to take the next step and actually sin. Temptations are all around us.

James 1:13-15

A stumbling block originally referred to that stick used in a trap that when sprung would cause the trap to trip and catch the unwary prey.

Those of us growing up on the Bugs Bunny/Road Runner show will remember how often Wiley E. Coyote would set such a trap with bird seed hoping to catch the Road Runner.

The difficulty in not giving into the temptation lies in the fact that we are all sinners.

David said he was born in iniquity. **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5)**

“Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies.” (Psalm 58:3)

Isaiah said we are all like sheep who have gone astray. **(Isaiah 53:6)**

Paul wrote that we have all sinned **(Romans 3:23)** adding in **Romans 3:10** that no one is righteous. **Romans 3:10-18**
Galatians 5:19-21
Ephesians 2:1-3

In Noah’s day **“God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5)**

We are natural born sinners. *I am not a sinner because I sin; I sin because I am a sinner.* I am often puzzled when I hear interviews of friends and family after someone they knew did some horrendous crime. You don’t hear them say that person was trouble from the start, “let me tell you all the things he was involved in.” It’s just the opposite. Many of them talk about how surprised they were to find out that person committed such a horrible crime. It took them totally off guard. They were so nice and friendly and considerate. They

never got into any trouble. I want to tell them to get a clue – it's in their nature. If it weren't for the grace of God, I'd do the same thing. We have a propensity to sin.

This last week David rescued four little bunny rabbits from our dog. She had found a nest and proudly carried two in her mouth. David rescued them. She came back with a third and then a fourth. When we let her out in the morning she gets a scent and is off tracking and she is racing around the yard nose to the ground, tail in the air. She is doing what a dog who is half Beagle does because it is in her nature. David's little gecko wouldn't do that because it has another nature – crickets.

It is in our nature to sin and Jesus pointed out the obvious that there are going to be things that come along that will cause us to sin – yesterday, today, tomorrow. We can count on it.

The good news is that we have an escape.

I Corinthians 10:13 “There hath not temptation taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful who will not suffer (permit) you to be tempted above what you are able, but will with the temptation, also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

Hebrews 4:15-16 “For we have not an High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

That said, in this life there is the propensity to sin. Even though we are saved and even though we are a new creation that old nature hangs around tempting us to give in. But notice Jesus gives an additional warning. It's about the person who causes us to sin.

B. The Person Who Causes Sin – v. 1b

Now, Jesus isn't saying that He knows people are going to be tempted and give in to sin and that's okay. Jesus is saying that temptation is inevitable. But He continues by noting that there is something even more despicable than giving in to our temptation.

“...but woe to that person through whom they (speaking of temptation and sin) come.”

Some of you will know the name Charles Barclay. For those of you who don't know the name, he is a former NBA basketball player; someone who has always been outspoken and controversial on any number of issues. Perhaps the most controversial statement he made is this: “I am not a role model.” He didn't want kids looking up to him as an example of how to live life. What he went on to say, and rightly so, was that parents should be the role models for their kids. The reality is this, everyone is an example to others whether we like it or not.

Jesus is in essence telling the disciples that others are going to look to them as examples.

It's difficult enough to overcome our own temptation and propensity to sin, but Jesus gives a stern warning to those who would intentionally lead someone into temptation to sin.

H. A. Ironside once said “We are responsible to so walk that others following our example may not go astray into the path of sin through our bad example.”

II Thessalonians 3:7 “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.”

I Corinthians 11:1 “Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”

Jesus gives a warning to those who deliberately set a trap for others to stumble into temptation and sin. That, He says, is a horrible thing.

Paul admonishes the Corinthians **“do not cause anyone to stumble.” (I Corinthians 10:32)**

John wrote in his epistle **“Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.” (I John 2:10)**

Jesus is saying woe to the person who becomes the stumbling block causing someone else to be tempted and even sin. The religious leaders were such a group causing others to sin.

A stumbling block can come through direct temptation – **I Thessalonians 4:6**

A stumbling block can come through indirect temptation – **Ephesians 6:4**

A stumbling block can come through our example – **Romans 14:13-15; I Corinthians 8:9-13; Galatians 5:13-15**

A stumbling block can come through our failure to stimulate righteousness in others – **Hebrews 10:24-25**

A stumbling block can come through false teachers – **Matthew 9:34; 11:19; 12:24; Luke 5:21; John 8:13, 41, 45, 52, 53**

A stumbling block leads down the broad road of destruction – **Matthew 7:13-15; 23:15**

Jesus is saying that it is a serious matter for a person to lead someone else astray. **What does He say will be the consequence for such an action?**

C. The Punishment for Compelling to Sin – v. 2

We all know from **Romans 6:23** that the wages of sin is death and **Hebrews 9:27** tells us that after physical death there awaits judgment.

Jesus graphically illustrates the nature of the punishment such a person deserves who causes someone else to stumble into sin.

Through the use of a hyperbole Jesus says it would be better for that person to tie a millstone around his neck and tossed into the sea, than to cause a little one to stumble. Such an act will receive a far more severe punishment.

A millstone was a large, round stone that rolled on top of another flat stone used to grind wheat. It was typically operated by attaching a donkey to a harness so that the animal could drive the stone crushing the wheat under the weight. Think what that would look like to tie it around the neck and jump into the sea. The obvious outcome would be death. In effect Jesus is saying that even if that were possible, that would be a better end than the punishment that awaits the person who leads others into temptation and sin.

Now some believe that Jesus is referring to children when He talks about “little ones.” When we hear in the news about some child who was led by a parent or another adult into doing horrible things we become incensed and outraged at even the thought of such an atrocious act. But I believe that Jesus is also referring to those who are new believers. It is possible that Jesus is talking about keeping others from faith or from growing in their faith.

Luke 11:52 “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

Whatever the case, the punishment is a result of compelling others to sin.

There is a warning about leading others astray, a warning against false teachers or becoming false teachers because a greater punishment awaits.

That’s in verses 1 and 2.

Notice also there is a word about forgiveness.

II. A WORD ABOUT FORGIVENESS – v. 3-4

Warren Wiersbe writes **“When people sin repeatedly, giving up on them is easy; but we must forgive them and trust God to work in their lives. We must be stepping stones and not stumbling blocks.”**

That is a great summary of this passage. Notice the steps Jesus gives in order to bring reconciliation when someone sins against us and our response.

Rebuke

Repent

Response

A. Rebuke – v. 3a

“If your brother sins, rebuke him...”

Matthew 18:15 offers some additional insight: **“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”**

That is the beginning process of discipline. Make it personal, make it private. When someone has sinned against us, we are to go to that person and talk about it with them – alone – privately. The intent, the hope is that the person will see what they did as wrong and seek to make things right.

All too often what happens is that instead of going to the person we begin to stew about what they did to us and then consider ways to retaliate or we remain mad at them.

About two weeks ago we had a Board meeting. Because I was going to be gone Robyn invited a friend over so she and her son, who is in David’s class, could hang out for the evening. She told her husband they would be going for the evening and he would have to find something else to do on his own. He began to stew about it and wonder why he wasn’t invited. Thursday came and they were getting ready to leave and he asked again if he could come over. She told him he wasn’t invited and it upset him more so he asked why he couldn’t come over, doesn’t Howie like me anymore? His wife then told him that I wasn’t going to be home because I had a Board meeting. After that everything was ok. Now a) she could have told him up front I wasn’t going to be there or b) he could

have called me and talked about it. But do you see how little things can become big things. All too often we don’t do anything about the hurt. We tuck it away deep down inside us and store it up for the next time they do something to us that adds fuel to the fire. We either don’t want to do anything about it, or we don’t know what to do about it, or we’re too upset to do anything about it. All of that continues to build up resentment, bitterness, anger, malice, hatred, revenge, all of which result from unforgiveness.

Colossians 3:8, 12-17

The other thing we tend to do instead of going to the person to discuss is to talk to others about it. We may take the “pious” approach and tell others that we need to pray for so and so because they caused a deep hurt or we just out right unload both barrels and tell the person in an angry tone how much so and so hurt us.

Jesus says we need to go to that person. On the other hand He provides admonition if we are the offending person. It’s found in **Matthew 5:23-24**. **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”**

Jesus suggests here that worship is hindered, even implying that our worship is unacceptable if we have offended someone and haven’t taken the necessary steps to be reconciled. We are to stop our worship and go make amends before we proceed.

Now, you may be thinking what if I do that and the other person isn’t willing to forgive me? I believe that you have done your part to seek restitution and are free to return to worship because your heart was right in attempting to have the relationship restored.

I want to add this because it’s important. If someone comes to you talking about what someone

else did to them, stop them before they go any further and ask if they have sought that person out in order to forgive and be reconciled. If they say no, gently rebuke them and tell them you don't want to hear anymore because they need to go and offer forgiveness. If they say yes, gently rebuke them and tell them you don't want to hear any more and add that it sounds like they still harbor some resentment and have not forgiven the other person and they need to go and make things right.

In our passage Jesus says we are to go and rebuke the person. That word sounds rather harsh, almost as if we can blast them with a verbal assault for their sin against us, give them a good chewing out. It somehow gives the impression that we would be justified for that kind of response. After all, the dictionary defines rebuke as blaming or scolding in a sharp way. I want to suggest that's not what Jesus meant by the term and I don't think you believe so either. We are not to approach the offending person in a sharp or harsh, confrontational manner, but rather in a gentle and loving manner. To rebuke them is in a manner that exhorts them to repent – being honest about what they did that was a sin against you but being loving.

Paul provides some additional insight for our approach. In **Ephesians 4:15** we are told to “**speaking the truth in love.**”

To the Galatians he advises it should be done in a gentle way. He adds there in **6:1** that we should be careful how we approach the other person because we also may become tempted and fall into sin.

Jesus tells us that when someone sins against us we are to rebuke them. The intent is that they might repent and they are more likely if it's done lovingly. That's what we see next.

B. Repent – v. 3b

That's also the hope, the intent of **Matthew 18:15**. The word repentance means to change one's mind,

implying that when the mind is changed, the behavior follows along with it. It is more than just saying or being sorry. There is a genuine remorse by which we don't want to do it again.

Unger's Bible Dictionary adds this definition: forgiveness is “a fundamental and thorough change in the hearts of men from sin and toward God.” It continues by noting three important steps that are evident if repentance has truly taken place.

1. There is a genuine sorrow toward God on account of our sin. **Psalm 51**
2. There is an inward repugnance (hatred) to sin necessarily followed by actually forsaking it. **Acts 26:20; Matthew 3:8; Romans 6:1ff**
3. We humbly surrender ourselves to the will and service of God. **Acts 9:6**

The reason to rebuke is to get them to repent. **What then is our response?**

C. Response – v. 3c-4

“So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

First, let's keep in mind that Jesus is not setting a limit on the number of times we need to forgive. That's what the Pharisees believed and taught. Forgiveness was based solely on Rabbinical traditions and not Biblical teaching. Their practice went back centuries. They taught that forgiveness was a burden and therefore only required to forgive three times and then only if the other person repented. That's the other thing I want us to note in this passage. Jesus is not implying that forgiveness is only required if the person repents. Such teaching justified their resentment if the other didn't repent. But that is exactly what the Pharisees taught.

The kind of forgiveness taught by Jesus was one of grace. Forgiveness frees us from anger, bitterness, resentment, revenge and so on.

Peter came to Jesus on one occasion asking Him how many times he had to forgive someone. He had been taught growing up that three times was all that was required. So Peter thought he would be super pious by double it and just for good measures forgive one more time for a total of seven. Seven seemed like a reasonable number. After all seven is the perfect number so it seems that seven times would be sufficient for complete forgiveness. Jesus responded that seven was insufficient but 70 times seven. In other words, as many times as the person offends you, your response is to forgive them.

Think back for a moment beginning in chapter 15 when Jesus entered the home of the Pharisee. Remember, they were looking at various ways to trip Him up. How many times had they offended Jesus in that afternoon alone and yet here is Jesus telling them that they should continue to forgive.

Paul reminds us in that great chapter about love that love keeps no record of wrongs. That's the implication here. Forgiveness stems from love as it reaches out to seek reconciliation and it does so time after time after time regardless of what was done to us. As we have been forgiven all our sins, every one, every kind, we are to forgive in the same way.

Ephesians 4:32

Colossians 3:13

We find that truth imbedded in **I John 1:9** where we are told that **“if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**

Colossians 2:13 **“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins having canceled the**

written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it all away, nailing it to the cross.”

Let me give you some reasons forgiveness is essential. This is not a complete list but you will get the idea.

1. Forgiveness is the most God-like thing we can do. **Matthew 5:44-45**
2. Included in the idea of the 6th commandment not to murder are anger, wrath, malice, vengeance and lack of forgiveness. **Matthew 5:21-22; I John 3:15**
3. Remember that whoever offends us, God is offended more. **Psalms 51:4; I Samuel 12:9-10**
4. Because we have been forgiven by God of greater and all sins we must be willing to forgive lesser sins committed against us. **Matthew 18:23-35**

Please keep in mind that according to **James 1:2-4**, offenses become the building blocks that help us to grow spiritually. Holding on to resentment for sins done against us will keep us from growing spiritually.

Someone has said that to not forgive is like taking poison in the hopes that the other person will die.

A Chinese proverb says if you don't forgive, dig two graves.

Unforgiveness will destroy us like a cancer eating away at the body. It affects our spiritual life and our other relationships.

So how do we work through forgiveness?

1. List people in your life you may be holding a grudge against because of some transgression no matter how seemingly small. These are the

people you need to forgive.

2. Reflect on the past and consider situations where you chose not to forgive and think about how you felt during that time and how your spiritual life was affected.
3. List the steps you need to take to begin the process of forgiveness.
4. Think through the following questions:
 Am I really aware of how much I have been forgiven by God?
 Am I trying to forgive too quickly or am I dragging my feet?
 Am I trying to sweep it under the rug and forget about it?
 Am I afraid that if I forgive the person it will appear that I am condoning the sin?

Here are some reasons it may be hard to forgive.

1. We don't understand how much we've been forgiven by God.
2. We believe that the Christ-like way is to forgive quickly.
3. We believe that in order to forgive we must also forget.
4. We believe that if we forgive, the sin against us will be condoned.
5. We believe that reconciliation and forgiveness are the same.
6. We believe that forgiveness is too painful.
7. We would rather ignore it or don't want to deal with it again.

We need to remember that God is the source of forgiveness. It is not in our nature to forgive, but rather to harbor ill feelings. If we are yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives allowing Him to develop His fruit (**Galatians 5:22-23**) in us then the natural result of His fruit will be forgiveness. If we cannot forgive then one or more of the fruit of the Spirit aren't maturing. With God's help, there is nothing beyond our ability to forgive. Jesus demonstrated that when He hung on the cross and uttered those penetrating words:

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what

they are doing.” In order to forgive we must surrender our struggle with unforgiveness to the Lord and ask for His help.

And here's the thing, you may go through the process of seeking out the person who has hurt you by sinning against you and at the end of the day they may not seek to be forgiven. That does not void our need to forgive. Jesus says that as many times as someone has sinned against us, we are to forgive them.

How about it? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone with whom you need to ask forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the garden that builds unity within the body of Christ. Let's remember that forgiveness is like the aroma that comes from trampled flowers.