STUDY GUIDE · 23 JULY 2026

Sin, Faith, and Humble Service: Growing as Disciples in Luke 17:1–10

Discipleship, Grace & Love of God, Sin & the Fall

Jesus moves from teaching about wealth in Luke 16 into three urgent and deeply personal topics for his disciples: sin, faith, and humble service. These three subjects are not random — they are logically and spiritually connected. As Pastor Brant Van Rolkel puts it: what Jesus teaches about sin requires faith to obey, and our obedience must be carried out in humble service to our Master who has saved us. This study guide invites you to follow that thread honestly. It will ask you to examine your own unforgiving heart, your pride, and your lack of repentance. It will also show you how faith in Jesus — even mustard-seed-small faith — makes the seemingly impossible possible: true repentance, genuine forgiveness, and the kind of humble service that brings glory not to ourselves but to the King who rescued us.

Jesus issues a severe warning to his disciples: our words and actions do not terminate with us — they affect vulnerable brothers and sisters who are following Jesus. The command 'Pay attention to yourselves' calls disciples to a conscious, deliberate examination of their own lives.

Jesus opens Luke 17 with one of his more severe warnings: it would be better for a person to have a millstone — a stone 1 to 2 meters in diameter, weighing 300 to 600 kilograms — hung around their neck and be cast into the sea than to cause one of these 'little ones' to sin. The 'little ones' here are

not small children but new, vulnerable followers of Jesus: the repentant tax collectors, the prodigals, the lost sheep who have just turned to him. Jesus is fiercely protective of every one of them, however easily overlooked they might seem. The severity of the warning reveals the depth of his care.

The command that follows — 'Pay attention to yourselves' — is a call to conscious, deliberate self-examination. So often, as the sermon notes, we live unconsciously in this world, not really attending to the words we say or the actions we let come from us. Jesus insists that this cannot be the disciple's posture, because our words and actions do not terminate with us. They travel outward and land on others, shaping whether vulnerable people around us flourish or stumble in their walk with him.

Paul sharpens this same call in 1 Timothy 4:16 when he instructs young Timothy: 'Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.' The reality, as the sermon observes, is that we are all following somebody and somebody is always following us. Discipleship is largely learned in community — which makes our self-watchfulness not a private spiritual exercise but an act of love toward those around us.

- What does it mean in practice that our words and actions 'do not terminate just with us'?
- Who are the 'little ones' Jesus is protecting, and who might they be in your own community?
- In what areas of your life do you tend to live unconsciously, without examining your impact on others?
- How does Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16 sharpen what Jesus says here?
- What is one relationship in which you need to 'pay attention to yourself' more carefully?

When sinned against, disciples fall into one of two errors — vindictive cancellation or sweeping minimization. Jesus charts a third path: frank, humble rebuke within the community, followed by genuine, repeated forgiveness whenever a brother or sister repents.

When someone sins against us, the sermon identifies two opposite but equally wrong responses. On one side is vindictiveness and cancellation: you have wronged me, so I punish you or hold you prisoner to your past wrongs regardless of whether you repent. This response offers the sinner no pathway toward cleansing or reconciliation. On the other side is total exoneration without reckoning: we minimize the guilt, excuse the wrongdoing, and say 'It's okay, it's fine,' sweeping it under the rug without ever dealing with what is actually there. Neither response takes sin with the moral seriousness it deserves, and neither reflects the heart of Jesus. He charts a third path — frank rebuke within the community of faith, offered not by a judgy policeman but by a fellow sinner who knows they also need mercy. Luke 6:37–38 reminds us that Christians are to overflow with mercy so that mercy is also what we receive. Luke 6:41–43 adds that we must remove the log from our own eye before addressing the speck in our brother's — humility before rebuke, always.

When a brother or sister does repent, Jesus is unambiguous: forgive them. And if they sin against you seven times in a day and turn to you seven times saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them. The logic behind this command is the gospel itself. Every true disciple has come to God carrying a debt of sin they could never repay and has received full forgiveness through Christ's death in their place. If we are the most forgiven people on earth, we are called to be the most forgiving. The sermon also makes a practical distinction worth sitting with: teaching children to say not merely 'I'm sorry' but 'Please forgive me for X' — naming the sin directly — and to receive not merely 'It's okay' but 'I forgive you for X.' This naming matters because it takes the moral weight of sin seriously while opening the door to real reconciliation.

Forgiveness, the sermon explains, includes three related elements: first, a heart posture that releases vengeance and bitterness and desires the offender's good; second, the actual act of granting forgiveness when the offending party comes in repentance; and third, movement toward reconciliation. We see all three in Jesus himself — his prayer from the cross ('Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do') reflects a heart posture willing forgiveness; repentance and faith are the moment forgiveness is received; and reconciliation follows as sinners are adopted into God's family. Importantly, forgiveness does not always mean immediate full reconciliation. An embezzler can be forgiven but may not return right away to the finance team. Consequences often remain in this life, and rebuilding trust takes time and wisdom from both parties.

- Which error do you tend toward — vindictiveness and cancellation, or minimizing and sweeping sin under the rug?
- Why does Jesus limit the rebuke command to 'your brother' inside the church rather than all sin everywhere?
- How do Luke 6:37–38 and Luke 6:41–43 shape the quality and spirit of a gospel-shaped rebuke?
- What distinguishes 'I'm sorry' from 'Please forgive me for ___,' and why does the difference matter?
- Which of the three elements of forgiveness — heart posture, the act of granting, or movement toward reconciliation — is hardest for you personally?
- Does forgiveness always require immediate full reconciliation, and what does the sermon say about why not?
- How does the gospel — being forgiven an unpayable debt — change your motivation and capacity to forgive others?

The apostles' plea — 'Increase our faith' — comes directly after Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, because they recognize they cannot obey in their own strength. Jesus responds that even the smallest genuine faith in him can accomplish what is humanly impossible.

The disciples' response to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is immediate and telling: 'Increase our faith.' They are overwhelmed. They recognize that what Jesus is asking — rebuking in love, forgiving seven times in a day, cultivating a heart posture free of bitterness — is simply beyond their natural capacity. Their cry for more faith is not a detour from the topic of sin; it flows directly from it. Jesus responds not by promising them a larger quantity of faith but by pointing to the quality of even the smallest genuine faith in him: faith like a grain of a mustard seed could say to a mulberry tree — with its notoriously complex and stubborn root system — 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey. The point is that by faith in Jesus, what is humanly impossible becomes possible.

No illustration from the sermon captures this more powerfully than the story of Corrie ten Boom. Corrie was a Dutch Christian who hid Jews during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. She and her sister Betsy were arrested and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Betsy died there. After the war, Corrie became an evangelist, convinced that only the gospel could bring reconciliation to a shattered Europe — and so she went to Germany with that message. After one of her meetings, a man approached her with his hand outstretched. She recognized him immediately: he had been a guard at Ravensbrück. 'A fine message, Fräulein,' he said. 'How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea.' He did not recognize her. She wrote: 'I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and I could not. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking?' On her own strength, forgiveness was impossible. And so she prayed the mustard-seed prayer: 'Jesus, help me.' She wrote: 'Mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place... a healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I

forgive you, brother, I cried. With all my heart. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did.' Corrie connected this experience directly to Romans 5:5 — the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. When we turn to Jesus in our weakness, he does through us what we could never do alone.

- Why do you think the disciples' request for more faith came specifically after Jesus' teaching on forgiveness?
- What does Jesus mean that faith 'like a grain of mustard seed' can uproot a mulberry tree — is this about quantity or quality of faith?
- Where in your own life does obedience to Jesus feel as impossible as uprooting a tree?
- What strikes you about Corrie ten Boom's prayer 'Jesus, help me' as a model of mustard-seed faith?
- How does Romans 5:5 — God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit — connect to the experience Corrie describes?
- What is one specific step of faith you could take this week toward forgiving someone who has wronged you?

After empowering his disciples by faith to do the impossible, Jesus immediately guards against pride. The parable of the servant and master teaches that even our greatest acts of Spirit-enabled obedience are simply our duty to the King who saved us. True discipleship is marked by humble service, not self-congratulation.

The parable in Luke 17:7–10 strikes modern ears as harsh, but Jesus tells it for a specific reason: to guard his disciples against pride. He invites his listeners to put themselves in the position of a

master with a servant who has been out plowing all day. Would the master say, 'Come in and sit down, the meal is ready for you'? Of course not. The servant prepares supper, serves the master, and eats afterward. Does the master thank the servant simply for doing what was commanded? No. And then Jesus drives the point home: '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.'

The sermon asks us to hold two realities together. Who is Jesus? He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the alpha and the omega, the one who pours out forgiveness, mercy, and grace without measure, who empowers us by his Holy Spirit to do what we cannot do on our own, and who is moving all things toward his desired end for his eternal glory and our eternal good. And who are we? We are those whose sin made his death necessary in the first place, and whom he has rescued entirely by grace. Everything we have — including the very faith and Spirit-power by which we obey — is a gift from him. There is no ground for pride.

This parable does not call us to a crushing low self-esteem that denies what God has genuinely done in and through us. It calls us to accurate self-knowledge: we have only done our duty, and we did it by his power. When we hold sin, faith, and humble service together — as Jesus does in these ten verses — the shape of Christian discipleship becomes clear. Honest confrontation with sin requires courage and humility; that humility drives us to faith in Jesus; and whatever Spirit-empowered obedience results is returned to God not in pride but in gratitude, saying with the disciples: 'Not to us, but to your name alone be glory and honor and praise.'

- Why does Jesus follow a teaching on faith with a parable about servants and masters — what danger is he guarding against?
- How does reflecting on who Jesus is — King of kings, the one whose death our sin made necessary — shape how you see your own obedience?

- In what areas of your Christian life do you feel a subtle sense of pride or entitlement before God?
- What is the difference between the posture 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty' and a low self-esteem that denies God's work in us?
- How does humble service connect back to both the sin and faith sections — why must all three go together?

Conclusion

The three topics of Luke 17:1–10 — sin, faith, and humble service — cannot be separated without losing something essential. Honest confrontation with sin in ourselves and in one another requires both courage and humility; that humility, in turn, drives us to faith in Jesus, because we quickly discover that what he commands is beyond our natural strength. True forgiveness — releasing bitterness, granting pardon to the repentant, and remaining open to reconciliation — is, as Corrie ten Boom discovered, impossible on our own. But when we extend our weakness to Christ, as she did with her mustard-seed prayer 'Jesus, help me,' he pours out his love through his Holy Spirit and does through us what we could never do alone. And when that Spirit-empowered obedience comes, the parable of the unworthy servants reminds us where to place the credit: 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.' Like Corrie, who could only extend her hand to the Ravensbrück guard because she first extended her weakness to Christ, we are invited today to turn to Jesus — confessing our sin, receiving his forgiveness, trusting him for the power to forgive others, and serving him gladly with humble hearts.

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