

Today's passage follows the parable of the rich man and Lazarus with a warning not to tempt others to sin and to examine our lives to see where we are at fault. Luke seems to connect themes, and if that is the case here, he is pointing out the rich man's example of hardness of heart could encourage others in his household and among his servants to be like him. This is a call to examine ourselves to see if we are leading others to sin by our bad example to others.

<sup>1</sup> *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 Jesus is warning His disciples. Sin is any thought or action that is contrary to God's holy nature. Temptation to sin will ever be present with humanity until the eternal kingdom begins. The word that is translated "temptations to sin" is one word in Greek. It is the word *skandalon* from which we get our word *scandal*. It originally meant the trigger of a trap.

I grew up seeing rusty traps hanging around my grandfather's cabin. His grandfather often took him trapping. In the center of those traps was a round plate of metal. When the trap is cocked, that plate becomes the trigger that sets off the jaws of the trap to spring shut on the animal. That plate would be called a *skandalon* in Greek.

The word "but" is emphatic in the Greek. Temptations will come BUT woe! Jesus was pronouncing a severe warning with the prophetic "woe," to those who bait those the trap's trigger. Temptation to sin is a good translation but the imagery behind it tells us even more. To set the trap is an intentional action. One must be looking for a victim. And to take the bait catches that victim in a deadly instant (Romans 6:23<sup>1</sup>).

The world has always downplayed sin. In the ancient world it was even part of false religious worship activities. When cultures decline, it is in unison with an increasing tolerance of sin. Presently our culture just calls sin fulfilling one's natural desires. The deadly consequences are ignored. Oh, there are some sins that society has accepted as worthy of punishment, but many are accepted as normal and even protected by laws. Our present world culture not only accepts them but demands that everyone celebrate them as normal. In some nations you can be punished for calling certain acts sinful. I'm speaking of everything from drunkenness to sex outside of marriage to homosexuality to lying to advance one's career.

Since this was spoke to the disciples, we should consider offenses by religious people. When a church leader falls into sin and young believers leave because of it, it was the leader's lifestyle that set that trap that discouraged them from wanting to be part of a fellowship. I watched sin spread like leaven when a respected pastor compromised. Every Christian sets an example for good or bad.

Legalism can be just as sinful. My mother told me how it grieved her when a guest to the church took her out to dinner, gave the waitress a hard time, and left a miserly tip with a gospel tract. He did his religious duty to leave a tract but left a bad impression of Christians. Share Christ with people and you will hear many stories of legalistic examples by Christians whose actions or words gave others an excuse not to believe.

Why do cultures accept things that are harmful to the individuals who do those things and detrimental to the culture at large? We read the answer in the last chapter (16:15). *That which is highly esteemed in the sight of men is an abomination in the sight of God.* We should not be surprised by the justification of sin. It has been going on from

the beginning. It is second nature to us until we come to Christ, and even then, we struggle with the temptation to justify selfish disobedience.

The point of what Jesus is saying here is that those who set such traps, those who tell you it is normal, that you can't avoid it, that you will be mentally unstable if you don't give in to those desires, or by their bad example influence others to sin are warned of their impending doom. Those who entice others to participate with them in some sin are warned of God's judgment on them (Romans 1:32<sup>ii</sup>).

*<sup>2</sup> 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 An industry of Capernaum was making millstones of basalt rock, the same dark volcanic stones we have in our area. They weighed around two hundred pounds or more. Some were circular and some were conical. The depths of the lake were considered by the locals to be the abyss where the souls of the dead resided. Consider the imagery Jesus is using. If you lead a little one to be caught up in sin, to stumble in their path of life, it would be better to have your neck tied to one of those massive stones and dropped into the depths of the lake. He is not saying that is what your judgment will be. He is saying that kind of awful death would be better than the judgment God will exact! It would be better to die drowning in those depths than to be an example that leads others astray or gives them a reason to reject salvation in Jesus. Better to suffer a tragic death than to distort the gospel in a way that leads others to sin. What a warning to watch our lives!

Little ones are not defined, but in another gospel this teaching is speaking about children (Matthew 18:1-6<sup>iii</sup>). Children are vulnerable and easily led astray. It could be applied to anyone with an innocent heart. Cults and false religions prey on the vulnerable who are searching for meaning in life beyond just making a comfortable life for oneself. Trapping these innocent ones in sin forms their mental patterns as to what is pleasure and what is to be the pursuit of life. The patterns are hard to overcome, even impossible without the grace of God.

This shows us the heart of God for the children and all who are seeking the truth. It is a severe warning to those who would take advantage of others' innocence or compromise in ways that gives others a reason to reject Jesus. It shows God's desire that all come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4<sup>iv</sup>).

*<sup>3</sup> Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, <sup>4</sup> 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 Pay attention to yourselves. We should apply the warning to our own lives. Watch out that we do not stumble into that trap of sinful behavior or tempt others to do so. We should examine ourselves regularly to see if we are compromising in any way that would lead us or others off the path God has for us (2 Corinthians 13:5<sup>v</sup>). And when we realize the enemy of our soul has found a weakness in us, we should find someone to help us make a stand, by keeping us accountable. It should be someone who has gained a victory in that area of their life.

We should also care about our brothers and sisters in the Lord. If they sin against us, we should love them enough to rebuke them out of love and in gentleness. We look at our own lives first and then help our brother or sister (Galatians 6:1<sup>vi</sup>; James 5:19, 20<sup>vii</sup>). You can offer to help them by keeping them accountable to walk in victory for Jesus' sake (Ephesians 6:13<sup>viii</sup>).

If a person has sinned against us and he or she repents, we should forgive, even if it is done over and over again (Matthew 18:21,22<sup>ix</sup>). We must remember that it is as difficult for them to break free from sinful behavior as it is for us. We don't have to let them take advantage of us, enabling their sinful behavior, but we should always take them at their word if they ask for forgiveness. And why is that? How many times do we sin against the Lord and ask for forgiveness? We are to be like our heavenly Father, full of grace and compassion, ready to forgive (Matthew 6:14,15<sup>x</sup>; Luke 15:20<sup>xi</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"* Luke 17:5 What a great request. They had not yet read the letter to the Hebrews that tells us that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1<sup>xii</sup>). They hadn't yet read that it was by faith that the deeds of the patriarchs and saints before them accomplished great things for God. But they understood that faith was what they needed. I think we all would love to have more faith. We know that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17<sup>xiii</sup>). But listen carefully to Jesus' answer in the next verse.

<sup>6</sup> *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.* Luke 17:6 A mustard seed is so tiny that several of them could fit on the head of a pin. What is Jesus trying to teach us? Faith is not measured quantitatively. You have it or you don't. If you have it then nothing is impossible. Uprooting a mulberry tree would take a huge amount of force. I've cared for mulberry trees. Their roots tend to run along the surface, ruining sidewalks and yards. They look impossible to uproot. To toss it into the sea would take tremendous power. Jesus isn't suggesting we pray to throw trees around. His illustration is telling us that with faith things that are impossible in the normal realm are possible. If you believe all things are possible (Matthew 19:26<sup>xiv</sup>).

Forgiveness of multiple offenses seemed impossible to the disciples so they asked how they could increase their faith. It isn't how much faith we have but in whom our faith is placed. Great faith in thin ice won't hold you up. A little faith in thick ice is well placed. Do we believe it is God's will to forgive offenses against us? Then we, by God's grace and with His help, *can* forgive. It may take some time. But God will help us. Relying on our own effort is like having faith on thin ice to hold you up. Faith in God implies that you believe it is God's will. That is to have faith in God. If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us (1 John 5:14<sup>xv</sup>). But he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is double minded (James 1:6-8<sup>xvi</sup>).

This mustard seed parable describes *"what faith can do, but in practice Jesus was not speaking of a faith that stages wonders but of a faith that facilitates healing, that understands the need of Christ to suffer (Luke 24:25,26<sup>xvii</sup>), that has confidence in God's providential care (Luke 8:25<sup>xviii</sup>), that will not fall away (Luke 8:13<sup>xix</sup>; 22:32<sup>xx</sup>) but will endure (Acts 14:22<sup>xxi</sup>), and that will believe God and grow."* -New American Commentary - Volume 24: Luke. And in this context it is faith that will forgive others.

Now we move on to a parable about how to live as we should. Sometimes we can presume that God is just waiting to do our bidding. Our focus in prayer can be our will instead of what God desires us to pray. This next passage should straighten out our attitudes. <sup>7</sup> *"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'?"* <sup>8</sup> *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'?* Luke 17:7,8 This parable is only found here in Luke. God is so gracious and loving that we tend to forget that we are His servants. He has purchased us with His blood (Acts 20:28<sup>xxii</sup>). He didn't purchase us to reign as a tyrant over us, but rather to instruct us in love as to what is best for our lives.

Our attitude in prayer can be arrogant at times. We pray for our own natural preferences. We tell Him what we think He should do for us without considering if it is His will. Prayer isn't about getting what we want, but rather about praying God's will into the earth--participating with Him in His goodness. Billy Graham once said that heaven's storehouse is full of answers to prayers that have yet to be prayed. I would add that those answers are all things God wants us to pray. He wants us to see that the best things we could ask are those which He desires to come to pass (Psalm 37:4<sup>xxiii</sup>). He wants us to partner with Him. This passage is teaching us the proper attitude in prayer.

A servant works for his master all day. When he comes in from a day of hard work, he may be tired, but he does not ask the master to serve him, or even for the master applaud the work that was done. Those things are his assigned duties. The servant continues to serve by preparing the master's dinner. We should never expect the role to reverse. Why would someone who has purchased us serve us? Why would we pay someone to let us serve them?

*<sup>9</sup> Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?* Luke 17:9 There is no need to thank the servant for doing what is expected. In Israel, bondservants sold themselves to a master for seven years. They received an amount of money to pay their debts and at the end of seven years left with some startup capital. In a similar way, we are indebted to God. Our sin debt was more than we could ever pay, so we went to Jesus and asked Him to pay our debt. He did! Thank God! And so, we are His servants. We aren't paying off our debt to Him though, for we could never pay off that big a debt. We are serving out of gratitude and love (Exodus 21:5<sup>xxiv</sup>). We serve Him because He is worthy. Everything we have came from Him. We owe Him our all! If we give our all back to Him, we deserve no thanks, for it was what was our duty. The only thing we can boast in is knowing Him and His love for us (Jeremiah 9:24<sup>xxv</sup>).

There is another passage that balances what is written here and gives the rest of the story. While it is entirely our duty to serve and we deserve no thanks, we see that Jesus declared that He came to serve us (Matthew 20:28<sup>xxvi</sup>). In fact, He does the opposite of what is expected. I believe Luke wrote our passage for today expecting us to remember what he wrote in 12:35-37: *<sup>35</sup> "Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, <sup>36</sup> and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. <sup>37</sup> Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.* Jesus said He would serve us if we faithfully await His return. It sounds like a contradiction to what he was saying in our passage for today, but actually it is complementary. We are not to expect God to serve us, but the amazing thing is that to those who are faithful He does the unexpected.

That was Jesus' example at the Last Supper and the Last Breakfast. He served His disciples by washing their feet and cooking breakfast (John 21:13<sup>xxvii</sup>). In Revelation He tells us we will sit down at the wedding feast of the Lamb as His bride (Revelation 19:9<sup>xxviii</sup>). To sit at that table is to be served. What a loving and generous God we serve!

*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.'*" Luke 17:10 Even if we did everything God commands and the Holy Spirit directs, we would never be worthy of our redemption and all the love God bestows on us. But here is the wonder of wonders. Though there is no obligation for Him to serve us, He does. The reason is love (John 3:16<sup>xxxix</sup>). And He calls us to love one another as He loves us (John 15:12<sup>xxx</sup>). In other words, even when people don't deserve it. Even when there is no obligation to love others, be like Jesus who loves the unlovely and unworthy. That is faithfully serving God. That is passing on the love you have received. It is being Jesus' hands and feet to a sin sick world. What better way to be a witness to the world the transforming power of Christ in us--our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27<sup>xxxi</sup>).

These few verses tell us our proper attitude toward service to God. First, we should **never cause another person to be tempted to sin**, especially children.

Second, we should **examine ourselves**. Let the Holy Spirit correct us. Become accountable. We are not ignorant of the enemy's designs (2 Corinthians 2:11<sup>xxxii</sup>).

Third, **we should love one another enough to correct someone** who is trapped by Satan in sinful behavior. We should be willing to offer them our help.

Forth, all we need is a little faith to pray God's will into the earth. **Never underestimate the power of the prayer of faith** (James 5:16<sup>xxxiii</sup>)

Fifth, **forgive!** God has forgiven us so much. Don't poison yourself with unforgiveness (Matthew 18:34,35<sup>xxxiv</sup>).

Finally, we should **never think God owes us anything. It is our duty to do all that He commands us**. How many of us only serve when it is convenient or when it fits our schedule? You might be thinking that is expecting too much. It would be true if He had not purchased us at such a great cost (1 Peter 1:18,19<sup>xxxv</sup>). Truth be told, we are often ungrateful and grudging servants. Worse yet we can even be disobedient servants. By the grace of God let us take on the right attitude. Let us see with eyes of faith how greatly we are loved, so that our service and obedience is a response to that love. Let us humbly recognize that we are unworthy of all this love. We need just a little faith to properly serve our Lord who gave Himself for us. If we will let Him help us, He can and will. His life in us will enable us to do what He asks of us (Ephesians 3:20<sup>xxxvi</sup>).

## Questions

- 1 In what ways can we tempt others to sin?
- 2 How can we examine ourselves?
- 3 How can we go about correcting someone caught in sin?
- 4 Is it worth the risk? Why or why not?
- 5 How much faith does it take to serve God?
- 6 Why should we forgive those who ask for forgiveness?
- 7 What are we as believers expected to pray?
- 8 How do we do that?
- 9 Do you see your life as a servant of King Jesus?
- 10 How does He flip this concept upside down?

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**<sup>i</sup> Romans 6:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**<sup>ii</sup> Romans 1:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

**<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 18:1-6 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

**<sup>iv</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

**<sup>v</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

**<sup>vi</sup> Galatians 6:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

**<sup>vii</sup> James 5:19-20 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**<sup>viii</sup> Ephesians 6:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

**<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 18:21-22 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

**<sup>x</sup> Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

**<sup>xi</sup> Luke 15:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

**<sup>xii</sup> Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

**<sup>xiii</sup> Romans 10:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

**<sup>xiv</sup> Matthew 19:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

**<sup>xv</sup> 1 John 5:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

**<sup>xvi</sup> James 1:6-8 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

**<sup>xvii</sup> Luke 24:25-26 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

<sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

**<sup>xviii</sup> Luke 8:25 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"

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<sup>xix</sup> **Luke 8:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

<sup>xx</sup> **Luke 22:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

<sup>xxi</sup> **Acts 14:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Acts 20:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Psalms 37:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Exodus 21:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’

<sup>xxv</sup> **Jeremiah 9:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

<sup>xxvi</sup> **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

<sup>xxvii</sup> **John 21:12-13 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Revelation 19:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

<sup>xxix</sup> **John 3:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

<sup>xxx</sup> **John 15:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Colossians 1:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

<sup>xxxii</sup> **2 Corinthians 2:11 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **James 5:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **Matthew 18:34-35 (ESV)**

<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

<sup>xxxv</sup> **1 Peter 1:18-19 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> **Ephesians 3:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,