“Take Heed to Yourselves”

Luke 17:1-4


December 7, 2014

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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 has just described hell as a “place of torment” from which there is no escape, where a “great chasm” is “fixed,” where its occupants plead for the least relief for the briefest moment because they are “in anguish in this flame.” Only through repentance from sin and trust in the teachings of Scripture can we avoid it. Sin, in Jesus’s telling of the “Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,” is a very terrible thing that takes one to a very terrible place. What, then, should the disciples do to avoid sin and its terrible consequences?

The connections between the verses that unfold in chapter 17 are not always discernable. Green agrees that verses 1-10 have the “appearance” of being thrown together “with no discernable
However, he argues that the theme of “do not be like the Pharisees,” continues to be the underlying theme, as it has been since 13:10 when the first objection to Jesus’s teaching on the Sabbath was raised (cf 12:1). Don’t be like the Pharisees, that is, avoid their sins, and the awful consequences of their sins. “Take heed (prosechō) to yourselves” is the central instruction. “Mind yourselves! Take care!”

This is not an uncommon exhortation of Jesus. “Beware!” (same word), Jesus says repeatedly. “Beware of false prophets” (Mt 7:15). “Beware of the leader of the Pharisees” (Lk 12:1; Mt 16:6, 11, 12; cf 10:17). “Beware of the scribes” (Lk 20:46). “Watch yourselves” (same words), Jesus warns, “lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of life, and that day (the day of Christ’s return and judgment) come upon you suddenly like a trap” (Lk 21:34). A casual, or indifferent, or flippant approach to sin and life is unimaginable.

Similarly, the Apostles urge that we “take heed.” The Apostle Paul urges the Ephesian elders,

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. (Acts 20:28; cf. 1 Tim 1:4; 3:8; 4:13)

The writer to the Hebrews urges,

1 Green, 611.
2 Zerwick, I:249.
Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. (Heb 2:1; cf 2 Pt 1:19)

Using different vocabulary (blepō, watch), the Apostle Paul urges,

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor 10:12)

“Take care,” he says repeatedly (1 Cor 1:26; 3:10, 8:9; Gal 5:15). “Look out, he warns” (Phil 3:2; Col 2:8, 4:17). “Take care, brothers, lest there be within any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God,” urges the writer to the Hebrews (Heb 3:12).

“Watch yourselves,” adds the Apostle John (2 Jn 8). Twenty-two times Jesus and the Apostles urge that we “take heed.” Given the terrible punishment that awaits sin, what should be our attitude? Jesus and the apostles warn against a foolish, careless, or naïve approach to the Christian life and urge that we be careful, watchful, and wise.

Don’t tempt others
And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! Lk 17:1)

What the ESV translates as “temptations to sin” is one word in Greek, skandala, which designates, says Morris, “the bait-switch of a trap that triggers off trouble.” It is translated “offenses” by the KJV, “things that cause people to sin” by the NIV, and “stumbling blocks” by the NASB. It came to represent anything that might trip up a person leading them to sin. Don’t become the occasion of the sins of others, Jesus is saying. Don’t lead them into sin. Yes, temptations are “sure to come.” The enticements that lure people into sin are inevitable. Our culture has made a science of seduction. It bombards us with provocations. Yet those who are the occasion of these enticements are culpable. Don’t be the one who introduces his little brother to drugs or alcohol or pornography. Don’t be the skeptic who tempts others to unbelief. Don’t be the seductress who tempts others to immorality. Don’t be the hypocrite who tempts others to cynicism. Don’t be the “partier” who tempts others to drunkenness. Don’t be the one who provokes others to anger and cursing. Matthew Henry lists types of offenders: persecutors, seducers, hypocrites whose scandalous living “weakens the hands and saddens the hearts of God’s people.” “Woe” awaits those who cause others to stumble.

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3 Morris, 255, cf Barclay, 244.
5 Henry, comments on Luke 17:1, 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. (Lk 17:2)

Jesus does not tell us what will happen to those who lead others into sin. The preceding parable answers that question. However, he does say that they would be better off with a “millstone,” the heavy stone used for grinding grain, “hung around (their) neck” and they be “cast into the sea” than to be the occasion of other’s sin. There, at the bottom of the sea, anchored by the millstone, “they would be safely out of the way and unable to influence anybody,” says Gooding. Better than they should incite others to sin. Better than then they be the seducer, the temptress, the cynic, the persecutor who trips up one of Christ’s disciples. “To cause …to sin” is again one word, *(skandalizō)*, the translators following the same pattern, “to offend” (NIV) and “to stumble” (NASB). “Little ones” is a way that Jesus at times refers to believers (cf Mk 10:24; Lk 10:21), underscoring our helplessness apart from the power of God.

When else do we cause other believers to stumble? When we allow bitterness to take root in our hearts (Heb 12:15). When we discourage them from following Christ by rejecting them or refusing to reconcile with them. When we exercise Christian liberty without regard for the impact upon others (Rom 14:13, 21; 1 Cor 8:13). When we sow discord and division in the church (Rom 16:17ff). When we neglect our duties or loved ones and thereby create conditions in which they are vulnerable to temptations. Our sins of omission can cause people to stumble. When we bring discredit upon the gospel by outbursts of anger or self-indulgence or “whenever

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6 Gooding, 279.
we make our Christianity unlovely in the eyes of the world" by our bad conduct, says Ryle. An example would be David, who in his sin with Bathsheba had “given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Sam 12:14 NASB). Similarly, the Apostle Paul says of his Jewish contemporaries that because of this bad behavior, and especially their hypocrisy, “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” (Rom 2:14; citing Isa 52:5). “An inconsistent believer,” says Ryle, “whether he knows it or not, is daily doing harm to souls. His life is a positive injury to the Gospel of Christ.” Our job, rather, is to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (Titus 2:10 NASB). The grace of God not only saves us but instructs us to “deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:12 NASB).

**Be careful ourselves**

*Pay attention to yourselves!* (Luke 17:3a)

We are not only not to be a stumbling block before others; we are also to be careful about ourselves. “Pay attention,” “watch” (NIV), “be on your guard” (NASB) or “take heed” (KJV) to yourselves. “Watch and pray,” Jesus tells His disciples, “that you may not enter into temptation.” Why? “Because the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). Believers are not to flirt with sin. They are not to toy with it. They are not to press the limits of Christian freedom to see how close they can get to sin without actually crossing the line. Far too much of that goes

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7 Ryle, II:220, cf Wright, 203.
8 Ryle, II:221.
on in an age of license. Is hell a terrible place or not? Does sin send us there or not? Drinking right to the edge of drunkenness without quite crossing over; pursuing money and things right to the edge of covetousness and idolatry; pressing the limits in one’s viewing habits and in the process indulging that which will inflame one’s lusts. These are all dangerous games to play. Jesus says, Take heed! Wealth is a “temptation” and “snare” (1 Tim 6:9). Rather than flirting with sin, flee it. That is the counsel of Jesus’s apostles. “Flee from the love of money” (1 Tim 6:11). “Flee immorality,” they urge (1 Cor 6:18). “Flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim 2:22). “Flee idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14). Pursue the opposite. Neutrality is not a winning strategy. “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness” (1 Tim 6:11; cf 2 Tim 2:22). Don’t mimic the fool who walks down temptation’s street (Prov 7:6-23). Rather, emulate Joseph, who when presented with the opportunity to indulge in “passing pleasures” of sin fled from Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39:7ff; Heb 11:25). Let us keep ourselves from idols (1 Jn 5:21). Our task is to “lay aside … every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). Let it be said of us that “there is no cause for stumbling in him” (1 Jn 2:10, NASB).

Take care of others

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, (Luke 17:3b)

Our responsibility for others doesn’t end with the purely negative responsibility of not tempting them (point 1). We are to look out for each other, particularly when one of the brethren becomes ensnared in sin. Because sin is so destructive, believers should confront sin in fellow believers.
“If your brother sins,” Jesus says, “rebuke him.” Jesus envisions mutual accountability in the church. We are watching out for each other. “We all sin,” someone objects. “Won’t we all be pointing the finger at each other all the time?” Yes, all sin is sin and worthy of condemnation. Yet, no, because what Jesus has in mind is 1) public, notorious and particularly destructive sin, not just the run-of-the-mill variety; and 2) inter-personal offences that cause divisions that we should handle promptly between ourselves. (“If your brother sins against you – Mt 18:15). We see the Apostle Paul dealing with “those who have sinned before” (2 Cor 13:2). Would that not be everybody? No, they “sinned earlier and (had) not repented.” Of what? Of their “impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced” (2 Cor 12:21). These are known, public, notorious sins. “Most of us find it unpleasant and in a cowardly fashion err by not doing it at all,” Gooding admits. However, there are consequences with our silence. “If our silence encourages a man to think that his sin does not matter, where might he not end up?” asks Gooding. 9 Silence implies indifference to sin. Silence implies indifference to the plight of the wayward believer. It implies that we don’t care. It implies that we care more about ourselves and avoiding trouble, than we care for the souls of the brethren. Believers are to care enough to confront. Jesus puts in this way in Matthew’s gospel:

> If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Mt 18:15)

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9 Gooding, 297.
Gaining or winning one’s brother is the point. Don’t let the devil win. Don’t let the world win.
Don’t let the bad guys win. Rescue the wayward soul; with all humility confront. The Apostle Paul puts it this way:

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\text{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.} \quad \text{(Gal 6:1)}
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If we know the “Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,” if we know what a terrible thing sin is and what a terrible place hell is, we will assume responsibility for each other and confront each other when it becomes necessary to do so.

**Forgive and reconcile**

Finally, believers should forgive sins and reconcile. “If he repents, forgive him.” Further,

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\text{… and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent, you must forgive him.’} \quad \text{(Lk 17:4)}
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Seven times a day does not mean that the eighth sin of the day need not be forgiven. It is a way of speaking of unlimited forgiveness (cf Mt 18:21f). Forgiveness for believers is habitual. We are to forgive and restore because to forgive is to restore (Gal 6:1). Love for the offender is to be
reaffirmed (2 Cor 2:8). From our point of view, the same offense repeated and repented of in a single day indicates a lack of sincerity. Jesus says that that is not our concern. “Christ is not depriving believers of discretion, to be foolishly credulous at the merest word,” Calvin argues. Rather, he “only wishes them to be fair and humane and reach out a hand to the penitent when they show signs of being sincerely displeased with themselves.”

Ryle insists that the person “who cannot forgive his neighbor the few trifling offenses he may have committed against him, can know nothing experimentally (experientially) of that love and full pardon which is offered us by Christ” (Mt 18:35; Eph 4:32). He complains of those who profess to love the gospel, “who fire up in a moment at the least appearance of what they call ‘offensive’ conduct, and make quarrel out of the merest trifles.” Forgiveness is a much-insisted-upon duty of the disciples. Jesus even incorporated this requirement into the Lord’s Prayer:

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\text{For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.} \text{ (Mt 6:14, 15)}
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In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus underscored this lesson (of seven-times forgiveness) with the Parable of Forgiveness (Mt 18:21-35). We have been forgiven an infinite debt; consequently we must forgive the relatively meager offenses committed against us.

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10 Calvin, II:235.
11 Ryle, II:223.
The point throughout these four verses is that sin is a terrible thing that condemns us to a terrible place. Consequently we are to “take heed,” by avoiding sin, not becoming the occasion of sin in others, forgiving and minimizing the impact and influence of sin. Why? So that we might live lives of repentance and faith in Christ, and join with Lazarus and Abraham in heaven, and not in hell.