

The Instructions

Luke 17:1-10

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Our Lord tells us that it would be better for any of us to have a large millstone hung around our necks and be thrown into the depths of the sea than that we should cause one of the little ones to stumble. What our Lord is implying without saying is that you deserve hell itself if you cause one of the little ones to stumble. That is why it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and to be cast into the sea.

Who then are the little ones? And how shall we not cause them to stumble?

The little ones are your brothers. You avoid causing them to stumble when you rebuke them when they sin against you. Our Lord commands, "When your brother sins against you rebuke him."

Now in order to understand this statement we first must know who our brothers are. Whoever they are they are the ones whom our Lord commands us to rebuke when they sin against us.

Everywhere in the New Testament when the word brother is not used of a blood relative means a fellow member of the same community. Since the primary community that the New Testament discusses is the Church when our Lord commands you to rebuke your brother when he sins against you, He is commanding you to rebuke fellow members of the Church when they sin against you.

In the immediate this will mean primarily fellow members of the congregation to which you belong. Then secondarily it will mean all who are baptized into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. These are your brothers. These are the little ones. These are the ones that if you fail to rebuke them when they sin against you, you are causing them to stumble. If you fail to rebuke them it would be better for you to have a large millstone hung around your neck and that you be cast into the sea.

This is why when new members are welcomed into our congregation whether by transfer from another congregation with whom Immanuel is in fellowship, or by their declaration that they are in fellowship with us or by Holy Baptism they are as often as possible welcomed publicly. That way the congregation can see in the Divine Service who their brothers are. That way the congregation knows to whom our Lord's instructions regarding rebuking people for their sins applies. This is also why when a member of the congregation departs the congregation either by release or transfer, the Church Council must approve such transfer or release at the very least. There is a brief service of Godspeed and Farewell to members of the congregation transferring elsewhere in case any of you who are moving away should want to make such action public before the congregation in the Divine Service. This is why our congregation keeps a roster of members. That roster is not primarily so that the District and Synod can assess us for convention expense. That roster is there so that we know to whom the commandment of our Lord to rebuke our brother when he sins against us applies.

The commandment of the Lord in this case applies to your brother.

When your brother sins against you, rebuke him.

When you rebuke your brother it has to be for a sin. You do not rebuke your brother just because he made you mad. Some people mistakenly assume that if another member of the congregation offends them or if another member of the congregation makes them angry that that other member has sinned against them. That is not always the case. Sometimes I am angry with a brother in Christ because he told

me the truth about myself and I did not like it. Sometimes I am offended by a brother in Christ because they speak in a way to which I am not accustomed. That does not mean that they have sinned against me. In order for a brother in Christ to have sinned against me, he or she must have actually broken a commandment of God. In order to determine whether or not a brother in Christ has sinned against you, you will have to know the commandments of God. Here is where the catechism is very handy. Luther has prepared a summary of all of God's Law in his meanings to the Ten Commandments. You do not have to know every last Bible passage where this or that commandment of God is located. You may simply refer to the summary of the Law of God which the catechism offers. In the explanation of the catechism are the relevant Bible passages if you want them.

Even when a brother does sin against you the book of James and the book of Colossians state that love covers over a multitude of sins. What is meant by this statement is that some sins that your brother commits against you are going to be of such a nature that out of love for your brother you will cover over them. You will not rebuke him for them. A brother in Christ may sin against us quite frequently sometimes without our noticing it. Such sins can be covered over by your love. You do not need to rebuke him for every last little thing that he did against you that violated God's commands. That would become tedious and legalistic and if our Lord opposes anything, it is legalism.

Our Lord's instructions apply when your brother has broken one of God's commands, you have been hurt by his action or failure to act, and you cannot let it go. In other words, if the sin that your brother committed against you bothers you, then you need to rebuke him. If you let this sin fester between the two of you, you will either flee from your brother in Christ out of fear of him, or you will walk away from your brother in Christ because you are mad at him. If you do that, then you have failed to rebuke your brother for his sins and it would be better for you to have a large millstone hung around your neck and to be cast into the sea.

Ok. Now, once it has been determined that your brother has indeed sinned against you and it is a sin that your love will not cover over and it is time to rebuke your brother, what do you do? How do you approach your brother? Many of you never keep this command of Jesus. You ignore it because you do not want to do it. You do not want to face your brother. This desire to avoid rebuking your brother is a product of Satan. He knows that if your brother dies impenitently for the sin he committed against you, your brother will be in hell. That is what Satan wants. He does not want you to rebuke him, because if you rebuke him according to the Lord's commands, he might repent and be saved. Satan wants you to fear rebuking him or to be mad enough that you do not want to talk to him. In that instance Satan has both of you. Your brother is impenitent and unless he repents he will be cast into hell. And if you fail to rebuke him, it would be better for you to have a large millstone hung around your neck and to be cast into the sea.

And yet, most of you have this nagging feeling about rebuking your brother even when he has sinned against you and the Lord commands you to rebuke him. And the nagging feeling is this: you have sins too. How can I go and rebuke my brother for his sins when I am a sinner also? As some of you have said, "What gives me the right to correct my brother when I am sinner to?" What do I say to my brother whom I am rebuking if in anger he brings up my sins and throws them in my face? Since some of you are terrified of facing your own sins in such a situation, you don't rebuke your brother and Satan wins. If you are terrified of facing your own sins then you do not yet believe in Jesus who died to take your sins away! If you are terrified of rebuking your brother of his sins because you have sins too then you are disobeying your Lord who told you to do this. You are adding to your pile of sins! If you are terrified of rebuking your brother because you know that you have sins also, then you are not seeking your justification in

Jesus Christ, you are rather seeking your justification in your good works and are therefore an unbeliever no matter what you say when you recite the Apostles' Creed.

Now having said all of that when you do go and rebuke your brother for his sins against you, it is necessary to keep all of the Lord's commands and not just the ones in Luke 17. In Luke 6 our Lord states, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye."

What our Lord is pointing out here is that we must deal with our own sins before we rebuke our brother for his sins. You cannot rebuke your brother in some kind of high handed fashion as if you are righteous and he is not. But notice that even in Luke 6 after you have taken the log out of your own eye by confessing your sins, your Lord still commands you to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Even in Luke 6 where His emphasis is on your own sins and not your brother's sins, he still tells you to rebuke your brother.

This means that when you approach your brother to rebuke him, you must approach him confessing your own sins. It would be good to begin by confessing the sins that you have committed against him. And many times in my experience he will confess the sin that he committed against you without even having to be told about it. But some people are obtuse and self-righteous. When they hear you confess your sins, they will accept that and then volunteer nothing and then you must correct them for their sins as your Lord commands. Be prepared to show them in the Bible what they have done wrong or from the catechism. Your goal is to restore them repentance not to prove that you are more righteous than they are.

Now, it is possible at this point that your brother will walk off and be mad at you. You must accept that. A slave is not above his master. If they were angry with the Lord when He rebuked them, they may be angry with you also.

But what if your brother repents? First of all, how can you tell when your brother is repenting? Everywhere in the Bible repentance is accompanied by listening. If your brother listens to you, he is repenting. An impenitent person will not listen. They will pretend that they do not know what you are talking about (although make sure that your rebuke is clear, if it is not then they may not in fact know what you are talking about). They may accuse you of your sins in order to deflect attention away from their own. If they do this, you have nothing to fear, Jesus has already forgiven you of your sins. They may make excuses for what they did or offer an explanation. If the explanation holds water, then the sin may become one that your love can cover over. But if the explanation does not hold water then they are not yet listening and are therefore not yet penitent. They may blame others for the sin they committed. They may blame you for the sin that they committed against you. They may point out to you that there are bunch of other people who think that what they did was ok or that there other people who are doing the same thing. None of that matters. What God says is what God says.

When this happens do not lose your temper because Galatians 6:1 says that such correction must be done in a spirit of gentleness. If you lose your temper in this situation, you will only add your sins to theirs and provide your brother with an excuse in his heart for not confessing his sins. Some people actually think that if his brother does not approach him right in correcting him that exonerates him from having to confess his sins. That will not fly on the day of judgment. God commands you to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry for a man's anger does not bring about the righteousness that God requires.

But what if he does listen? What if he acknowledges his sin to you? What if he tells you that you are right, that he did do that against you and that it was wrong.

If you are the one who is being rebuked, tell your brother, "Please forgive me," or "will you forgive me?" If you are the brother doing the rebuking and your brother confesses his sin, tell him, "I forgive you." Tell him that Jesus forgives him as well.

Satan despises this because it means that neither one of you are going to hell and that the Lord's millstone is unnecessary.

What if this happens seven times in one day over the same stinking sin? Then seven times in one day, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.

No wonder when our Lord originally gave these instructions, the disciples said, "Increase our faith!" Many are faithless and do not do this at all. Some are Pharisees and use this system to promote their own self righteousness. You will need a pile of faith to face your own sins. It will help if more of you start coming to me for individual confession and absolution in order to practice what it is like to confess one's sins. Not to worry I have sworn an oath before God not to divulge what you say to me. And I go to confession before a brother pastor myself. It is a helpful practice to tell him what my sins are and hear him forgive me. It gives me courage to confess my sins to you when it is appropriate.

But honestly if you have faith as much as a mustard seed, you can say to a sycamore tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it will obey you. That is all the faith that it takes to rebuke your brother and forgive him, to confess your sins and receive absolution.

Now understand that these commands are the commands of your Lord. It is somewhat unfortunately that we Americans don't have lords. We often do not know how to treat Jesus. We are accustomed to disagreeing with our President. In fact we are so accustomed to disagreeing with him that we expect to do so as soon as he is in office.

Folks, He is the Lord. He is the One who rose from the dead. You are His slaves. He bought you with His own blood. I understand that you are also His friends and His brothers as sons of your Father in heaven. But that does not negate the fact that you are also slaves. After the slaves come in from the field, does the master say, "Recline at table and eat and drink"? No. Does he not rather say, "Dress yourselves and serve me while I eat and drink"? Do the slaves find his favor because they did what he asked them to do? Understand your position before Jesus. He shed His blood to make forgiveness incarnate in our lives. He died an agonizing and damning death even though He was innocent to grant us the authority to forgive one another and to give us the motivation to do so and to remove all condemnation from our lives so that we would not be limited by our sins in the past, but liberated to do His commands.

Here are His commands. He expects them to do be done. And even if we do them we are still unworthy slaves for we have only done what He told us to do.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.