

Living the Impossible Dream **Luke 17:1-10**

If you think back over the last twelve months, what scandals spring to mind?

- The NSW Labor government's had their fair share – allegations of corruption; a minister dancing semi-naked on a table, Iguanagate.
- The Australian Rugby League's also managed a few – Brett Stewart; Anthony Wattmough; Willy Mason.

That great modern authority Wikipedia says "A scandal is a widely publicised incident that involves allegations of wrongdoing, disgrace, or moral outrage. A scandal may be based on reality, the product of false allegations, or a mixture of both." They have a list of scandals with the "gate" suffix – which goes all the way back to Watergate.

Have you ever thought of the enigma of scandals?

- On the one hand, we love them. The newspapers know that. The TV crews know it. The women's magazines know it. They all thrive on that fact. They just long for the next juicy scandal to come along so they can sink their teeth into it and make more money. And if they're lacking a scandal, they'll simply go out and try to dig one up or create one all on their own. Why? They know we love them. We enjoy bringing the tall poppies down to size. But worse than that, for many they bring a vicarious pleasure – through the scandal, they fantasise what they'd like to do themselves.
- And that brings us to the other side of scandals. They're simply wrong. They're shameful. They

should certainly be dealt with and cleaned up in a just way – but they shouldn't be publicised. But we've been trained to lose our sense of shame about it.

Don't Make Stumbling Blocks

The word *scandal* comes from the Greek word used in Luke 17:1 – the word the NIV translates as *cause to sin*. Our modern word *scandal* is quite a distance from the meaning of this Greek word used in this verse – but I think our modern Christian attitude to this verse is very much like our society's attitude to scandals.

- We salivate over things that cause others to sin.
- We don't acknowledge the shame involved in the way we do this.

Have you ever overheard a group of young people talking about the things they've fooled their parents about?

- Slipping out of the house at night to get up to mischief with their mates.
- Sneaking into clubs on false identities.
- Borrowing the family car to joyride with friends.

And isn't it the same when you overhear Christian young people talking together? Sure, they haven't reached the same level as the non-Christians. They haven't forged fake IDs and got drunk. But, when they get together, they still boast to one another about the things they've done that their parents told them not to do. They go for bragging rights over things which should cause shame.

And it doesn't stop when we grow up. Get a group of Christian men together and listen to them talk about driving. How often do they boast about how enjoyable the scenery is as you cruise down the highway at 90?

But I get ahead of myself. What is it that *causes people to sin*?

- Some people think it's to do with false teaching – that, if I tell you wrong stuff about Jesus and the gospel, you'll be led away from the truth.
- Some people think it's to do with bad behaviour – that, if I indulge in ungodly behaviour, you'll be tempted to follow my example.
- Some people think it's to do with older Christians being overly critical of younger Christians – that, if I express a harsh, unforgiving attitude to a young Christian, I'll turn them off Jesus.

There are lots of variations on the nature of the exact cause. I don't think it matters. Even if you could tie down the word to one particular meaning in this context, what are you going to say?

Jesus says it's a big problem if your wrong teaching causes another Christian to stumble, but it doesn't matter if your wrong behaviour has the same result. It's OK for you to destroy another Christian by what you do, but not by what you say. Or it's OK to destroy them by your sarcastic attacks on their personality – as long as you don't tell them any false doctrine.

And then, what's meant by *sin* in this context – or some of your translations may have *stumble*?

- Is it any and every sin? If I teach you to have a proud attitude by an attempt to increase your self-esteem, is that included? If I encourage you to covet or be greedy by showing you my extensive CD collection, is that the sort of thing Jesus means here?
- Or is Jesus only talking about the sort of stumbling

involved in apostasy? It's when my teaching causes you to give up faith in Jesus. Or it's when my lifestyle leads you into such ungodliness that you forget about following Jesus.

That's a tough question – and I don't think the context makes it clear one way or the other.

However, a couple of things to note:

- First, can you actually make that sort of distinction? People give up Christianity for all sorts of reasons.
 - Some are led away by false teachers. But it's never the case of someone coming along and saying: "Hey, look. I'm a false teacher. I'm going to lead you away from Jesus." It always starts subtly. They may be wolves, but they look like sheep.
 - Some give up because they think they see hypocrisy in Christians – and all sorts of seemingly minor things are cited as the sources of that hypocrisy: greed, pride, gossip, envy, snobbishness – all things that we're wrongly tempted to think of as minor. How do you know how a brother or sister sees that habit you excuse as a minor sin in your life?
- Secondly, the attitude behind that question tends to be: what sin is it OK for me to get away with? When is it OK for me to rebel against God and teach wrong doctrine or do the wrong thing? I think that once you put it that way, the initial question becomes moot, doesn't it? It may well be that Jesus talks here about stumbling at the level of apostasy – but if you think you can turn that around to excuse what you think is some lesser sin – some lesser rebellion against God, you haven't under-

stood the gospel.

The other bit people disagree about is: Who are these *little ones*?

- I suspect many people immediately think of children – simply because they're little. There's nothing in the context to indicate that meaning.
- Some suggest it's poor people. The rich man at the end of chapter 16 put all sorts of stumbling blocks in the path of Lazarus. Yet, Lazarus apparently didn't stumble – since he ends up in Paradise.
- More likely, I think it refers to Jesus followers. It's a term Jesus uses elsewhere to refer to them (as we have seen previously).
- Some go further and suggest it refers to relatively new followers – people who are just starting out in the Christian life.

Again, in terms of how we live – of how we apply this to ourselves – it doesn't really matter. As God's people, we aren't looking for excuses to sin. Nor are we looking for excuses to cause anyone else to sin or stumble. It's not:

- O, she's a non-Christian, it doesn't matter if she sees me being greedy at the shops.
- Or, he's a mature, adult Christian – he should be able to cope with me dressing immodestly.

That's simply the wrong approach.

Jesus says: these things will come – they're inevitable. That's the nature of living in a world infected by sin. It'll be hard. Temptations will come – and they'll come via other Christians. Make sure you're not the one causing the temptations for others. Don't bother about pointing the finger at others – trying to blame them for your wrong behaviour. Examine your own life. Seek to be godly.

Live in such a way that others can't point the finger at you.

Keep Forgiving

Jesus then turns to the other side. He's told us to watch that we don't sin against others. Now He tells us what to do when others sin against us. If we should be careful about sin in our own lives, we should also be careful about it in the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters. As God's people, we're to share together our commitment to pursue God's righteousness.

Two things. First, rebuke them. They've done the wrong thing. Doing the wrong thing's serious. It's an offence against almighty God. It's right that such evil be brought to their attention. However, for those doing the rebuking, it's important it be done in the right way.

- It must be done in humility. It's not: I'm better than you so I can tell you off.
- It must be done with proper appreciation for one's own sinfulness. The plank must be removed from one's own eye before the speck can be taken out.
- It must be done knowing your own forgiven state – we're both wretched rebels forgiven only on the basis of God's amazing generosity.
- It must not be done from vengeance. You hurt me with your sin – now I'll hurt you with my rebuke. That won't work.
- It must be done with love. It's not: I'm doing this because it makes me feel good or gives me a sense of power of superiority. It's because I'm concerned about the impact of sin on the other person's life.
- It must be done prayerfully. Only God's Spirit can truly convict another of sin.

That's not intended as an exhaustive list. Rebuking is hard business – but it's still important business. Nothing that I've said should be taken as an excuse not to do it. The well-being of my brother or sister is more important than the difficulty of the task.

Yet, the focus of these verses is on the second thing Jesus says: namely, forgive them. Where there's repentance – where the person acknowledges they've done the wrong thing – then there's to be a quickness to forgive. The sin isn't to be held against the person.

What's forgiveness? It's not a feeling. It's not having nice warm fuzzies towards the person who's hurt you.

- It's possible to have those nice warm fuzzies and not really have forgiven the person – perhaps not very likely, but possible.
- It's also possible to have truly forgiven without feeling all gushy towards the other person.

Forgiveness means I'm not going to hold this matter against you in terms of our ongoing relationship.

- I'm not going to treat you badly because of it.
- I'm not going to bring it up with you.
- I'm not going to gossip about it to others.
- I'm not going to complain to God about it.

Is it easy? No. Often, every fibre of your being will scream for vengeance. You'll want justice. You've been hurt. It's right someone pay for it. That's what Jesus did. He paid for it that God may lavishly forgive you. He paid for it that you may likewise forgive others. When you find it hard to forgive, talk to God about it.

- Not to rehearse all the details of the hurt.
- Not to get God to take vengeance for you.

- But to ask God to help you put into practice the decision you made to forgive this person.

And if they do it again – and if they repent again – then forgive them again. The picture's pretty clear, isn't it? Seven times in the one day.

- It isn't permission to get stuck in on the eighth time.
- It's saying: Always be willing to forgive. Again and again and again.

Christians are forgiven people. The Christian community is to be a forgiving community. Yes, we're to take sin seriously. Sin is an offence to God. Thus, we're to resist it. We're to rebuke it where necessary. But we're also to forgive it. We're not a judgmental, legalistic bunch where everyone's trying to climb to the top over each other by scoring points by the sin they find in others. Rather, we're a forgiven bunch secure in our status as God's children and committed to building up one another in restored loving relationships.

A couple of quick things before we move on:

- First, Jesus isn't encouraging witch-hunts or busy-bodies. You're not doing the private investigator thing and trailing your brother round all day watching carefully for him to slip up. It's where there's a known action that's done to you or in front of you.
- Secondly, Jesus doesn't say: If your brother sins, tell everyone else about it. He doesn't say: If your brother sins, get the pastor to rebuke him. He says: You deal with it – and deal with it with the person involved. No one else needs to know anything about it – unless your brother refuses to listen; in which case you follow the procedure in Matthew

18.

Exercise Faith

That brings us to verse 5:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

Perhaps at first glance you think:

What on earth has that got to do with avoiding sin and providing forgiveness? Are the apostles trying to change the subject? Or has Luke done a cut-and-paste job on his computer and slipped this bit in at the wrong point?

No, I think this is a very reasonable request on the basis of what Jesus just said.

- Jesus just told them to avoid putting stumbling blocks in the paths of others – to guard their words and their actions so that they don't tempt others to sin.
- Jesus just told them to forgive their repentant brother – not just once, but again and again and again.

For your average everyday human, such demands sound impossible. Even for your above average super-saint, such demands seem overwhelming. No wonder they ask for help. The standards Jesus sets are too high for them. They can't do it by themselves. They think they need a super-dose of faith to do this.

They're partly right and partly wrong.

- They're right in that they can't do this by themselves. Our self-centred natures rebel against these things. We need God's help. We need God's work in our lives if we're going to forgive like this.
- They're wrong in their understanding of faith. They think the quantity's the key issue. They think in

commercial terms: the more they can get, the more successful they'll be.

Jesus works to correct their understanding by way of an illustration. There are two impossibilities here.

- The mulberry tree in question has a vast and deep root system. Maybe today we could successfully uproot it with mechanical digging equipment and cranes to lift it – but they didn't have those things available in those days.
- And then, how do you plant a tree in the sea. You can chuck it in and watch it get thrown around by the waves – but to successfully plant it so that it thrives ...

Two impossible things. And yet, says Jesus, if you have just a tiny amount of faith – faith as small as a mustard seed – you could do that sort of thing.

Now, Jesus isn't expecting His disciples to do that to mulberry trees. There's no record in the Bible of that happening. There's no record in church history of anyone doing it. That wasn't the point Jesus made.

Rather, He's saying two things:

- First, the quantity of the faith's not the issue. All you need is a little bit of genuine faith.
- Secondly, it's all to do with the nature of what faith is. Faith is simply trust. It's not a mystical word. It isn't rare. And so the crucial thing is what you're trusting in. Is that reliable? Is that trustworthy? Is that capable of bearing the weight of your trust?

Some people have a magical understanding of what they think faith is in the religious arena. Faith becomes a per-

sonal possession to be exercised by its owner. Faith becomes a means of manipulating God. The more faith you have, the better you'll be able to twist God's arm and get the result you want. The person with the faith exercises control of the situation.

That's not Biblical faith. Biblical faith recognises that God's God. He calls the shots. He's the one in control. He tells us what's right and we believe Him. He tells us what He wants us to do and we trust Him. He provides the promise of what He wants to do in our lives and we act in faith on that promise. We depend on God for all that we need.

The demands Jesus makes of His followers are not easy. They're totally right – but they aren't easy. There's that within us that doesn't like submitting to God. We'd rather submit to our own desires – to run our own lives the way we want to run them. And, when we focus on that, what Jesus asks just seems too hard. We don't want to forgive the person who's hurt us. We want them to pay for the hurt they've caused. We want to hurt them in return. We need God's help and strength if we're to forgive like this. And that's where faith comes in.

- We trust that God's brought us to new birth – giving us a new inner heart that increasingly wants His will.
- We trust that God tells us the truth about resisting sin and granting forgiveness – that living according to what He tells us is what's good.
- We trust that God's Spirit within us will help us do His will – even at those times when we don't feel like it.

Remain Humble

And as we grow in trusting God in that way – and as we see the changes God brings about – there's a danger of thinking we've done it ourselves. We're tempted to think we're not so bad after all. We're tempted to take pride in ourselves and think God owes us something. We can imagine we've done God a favour by believing Him.

I think that's where this next story fits in. What does God owe us? We're so used to the reward system that we've come to expect rewards simply for doing what's right or for doing our duty.

- Nowadays, if a young child sits still in class for ten minutes – it's no longer a matter of that's what they should've done all the time – they actually expect a reward for it.
- If a worker fails to get sick and turns up for work every day of the year – it's no longer a matter of that's the contract of employment they made in the first place – they actually expect a bonus for their faithfulness.

We expect God to fit in with this system.

Imagine a person who went through life always doing the right thing.

- They never broke any of God's commandments.
- They always helped people in need.
- They never dwelt on any wrong thoughts – no lust, no greed, no envy, no hate.
- They always did what was required of them.

Does God owe that person a reward? Of course not. They've only done what they were created to do in the first place. They haven't done anything beyond what was expected. So, God has no reason to judge them – to

punish them for wrongdoing. So they'll still have life – they won't die. But there's nothing they've done that actually earns a bonus.

After you've been a Christian for a while and God's enabled you to clean up your life quite a bit and He's given you the strength to forgive your brothers and sisters quite a few times, you may be tempted to think:

I'm doing pretty good at this Christian life thing. I've made a lot of progress. Perhaps I could just rest on my laurels for a little while. Take it easy. God owes me. I deserve a bit of a reward.

Jesus says: That's messed up thinking.

It's messed up because you've forgotten the relationship. He's the Creator; we're the creatures. He's the Saviour, we're the ones who needed saving. He's the Master, we're the servants. He tells us what's right and proper; not the other way round.

It's messed up because your duties aren't finished yet. Is sin completely eradicated in your life? Have you totally forgiven all who've hurt you?

It's also messed up in the nature of the *reward* it expects.

- Is the reward to be taking a bit of a holiday in the war against sin? Or even worse, is the reward to be permission to do something sinful without consequence? Once we put it that way, the messed up thinking becomes pretty obvious, doesn't it?
- It's the same result if we approach it from the other side as well. What sort of reward can God give? Can He give you something that's sinful? That hardly makes sense. Can He give you something

that's not good for you? Not likely. So, isn't all that's left simply stuff that's according to His good and perfect will? And so, isn't that more of the same? More battle against sin. More forgiving those who hurt you.

God tells us He's already given us every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. He hasn't held anything good back. What more is there for Him to give us?

Conclusion

In closing this morning, let's come back to the idea of *scandal*. Where's the real *scandal* in all this? Two spring quickly to mind. The first is the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says the cross is a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. The scandal is that we creatures publicly execute our Creator – and that we do it in such a shameful way. Yet, this is a scandal God wants broadcast to the ends of the earth – for it demonstrates His great love and generosity towards us; His great offer of forgiveness to us for our sin against Him.

The second scandal flows from that. It has to do with us – with those claiming to be Jesus' followers. We don't trust God the way we should.

- We hang onto sin in our lives.
- We hang onto unforgiveness.

We're not always convinced God's got our best interests at heart. We think we know better than the Creator what's best for us. We want to pursue our own petty little dreams and ignore the goals God gives us. We want to call Jesus Lord, but not treat Him as such in the way we live. We see the great things God's done for us – the way He's demonstrated that He's actually for us – but still we fail to trust Him fully day by day. That's scandalous.