

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
October 5, 2025  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

Luke 17:1-10 (EHV)

*Jesus said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! <sup>2</sup>It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. <sup>3</sup>Watch yourselves.*

*“If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”*

*<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”*

*<sup>6</sup>The Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. <sup>7</sup>Which one of you who has a servant plowing or taking care of sheep will say to him when he comes in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at the table’? <sup>8</sup>Won’t the master tell him instead, ‘Prepare my supper, and after you are properly dressed, serve me while I eat and drink. After that you may eat and drink’? <sup>9</sup>He does not thank the servant because he did what he was commanded to do, does he? <sup>10</sup>So also you, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.’”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The classic children’s book, “The Little Engine That Could” teaches children the value of perseverance and a positive attitude. Although the little train engine was small, he pulled the heavy load by saying, “I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” There is certainly some truth in this story. A negative attitude often leads to not trying and so you won’t accomplish anything difficult. On the other hand, a positive attitude can get you started, and you find a way to do something that seemed too hard at the beginning. Being positive and working hard are wonderful characteristics to develop in children and adults.

But that classic story doesn’t deal with the other side of things. Sometimes we can’t. Some tasks are actually impossible for us to accomplish. I can’t pull a long train of railroad cars over the mountain pass. I can’t fly no matter how fast I flap my arms. I still can’t dunk a basketball. No amount of positive thinking is going to change some things.

Jesus presents his disciples and us with two tasks that we can’t accomplish, not without him doing all the heavy lifting. He asks us to avoid causing little ones to fall into sin and he asks us to forgive those who sin against us repeatedly. The disciples knew enough by this time in Jesus’ ministry to know that they couldn’t do these things. “Increase our faith” was their reply. If we look for the power of positive thinking to help us avoid leading little ones into sin and look inside ourselves for the power to forgive others, we can’t either. So, we also pray, “Increase our faith.”

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Jesus is quite serious about protecting little ones. He doesn’t want anything or anyone to separate the little ones from their Savior. The world and their own sinful nature will present them with enough temptations. We are not to be the cause and source of temptation for the children in our lives. But we just might be. For children learn from us. They learn from parents and grandparents what marriage is supposed to look like, and we don’t always show them the correct picture. They learn from their cool aunt or uncle what kind of words to speak to be cool like them and we are not always the best influences. Little ones get a sense of whether they are wanted at church or not by the way the adults greet them or ignore them. How heartbreaking it is when a child grows up and avoids marriage because of the example adults gave or avoids church because of the behavior of adults. Keeping or taking away

a little one from faith in Christ is about the worst thing we can do. No one here, with the exception of Christ himself, is guiltless in this regard. Although we try with all our might to avoid it, we've all led children into sin by our words and actions. We all deserve to have a millstone tied around our neck and be thrown into the sea.

"I think I can. I think I can. I think I can," won't work to make ourselves better. We don't need more trying; we need more Jesus. We need more gospel. We need more forgiveness. Therefore, we repent, ask the Lord to forgive us and pray, "increase our faith." This is the example our own children and the little ones in our world need. They need adults in their lives who humbly turn to Jesus for everything. For the little ones will fall into the temptations surrounding them. They need to know who to turn to for help and forgiveness and unconditional love. Turn to Jesus. That's what dad does. Turn to Jesus. That's what my grandma does. Turn to Jesus. That's what I see all those old people do at church. Turn to Jesus and he will forgive me.

Jesus' second task for us might be even more difficult.

*"If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*

As believers in Christ, we know the grace of God towards us, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He forgave us all our sins. There is no limit to God's forgiveness through Christ. But we have limits. Forgive seven times! In one day! The same person! Some days we might be compassionate and gracious and make it to the third or fourth time before losing our cool. And other days we barely make it past the first request for forgiveness. It depends on the day we are having.

It also depends on the sin of the other person. The Lord God sees every sin in the shadow of the cross. The suffering and death of God's Son has paid for every sin. No sin is too big to be covered by the holy, precious blood of Christ. God's forgiveness is not limited to only some sins. But sometimes our forgiveness is. How big of a sin against you would you forgive?

Just last month, Erika Kirk, spoke at her husband's funeral service and forgave the man who murdered her husband. And please don't take what I'm going to discuss next as criticism of her public statement of forgiveness or as saying that we are supposed to forgive like she did. I simply want us to think, what would I do if someone sinned against me in such a horrible, life-changing way? More importantly, what is Jesus telling me to do in Luke 17 when someone sins against me in a terrible way?

Does the person who survived some kind of abuse as a child have to forgive the abuser? Does the believer who loses a loved one to a drunk driver have to forgive that person? The answer is yes...and maybe. In many severe cases like these, the offender is not repentant. There is no request from the person who sinned to be forgiven. Jesus in Luke 17, tells us about the case where someone repents. If someone is truly repentant, we forgive as we have been forgiven by Christ. But what if they have not repented?

In that case we can't announce the forgiveness of Christ to them because they have not been forgiven by God. When Erika Kirk and others who have been in her situation announce that they forgive the person who sinned against them, it may be a different kind of forgiveness than the forgiveness of sins before God. Forgiveness of sins is only given to repentant sinners who trust in Christ. On the other hand, forgiving someone who is not repentant is more like the attitude Christ had from the cross. As he suffered and died to pay for the sins of the whole world, he prayed, "Father, forgive them." Jesus desired to forgive the sins of those who put him on the cross. Jesus was at that very moment securing their forgiveness by his own blood. But not everyone there would be forgiven. Some, it seems repented and turned to Christ as the Son of God and their Savior. They received the forgiveness Jesus earned and desired to give them. Others rejected Jesus, continued in their unbelief, refused to repent and did not receive the forgiveness won by the man nailed to the cross in front of them. Jesus desired for them to be forgiven but they would not have it because they would not repent.

Since we have received the forgiveness of all of our sins through faith in Christ, we forgive those who

sin against us. We announce, not only our forgiveness, but also Christ's forgiveness to those who repent. But to those who do not or will not repent, we instead pray that they would repent and trust in Christ. We forgive them in the sense of not seeking revenge. We forgive in the sense of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. We forgive in the sense of sending away our anger towards them. We turn that person over to God's justice and mercy. And then we live at peace with everyone as much as it depends on us.

This is not easy. You will not find the strength to do this looking inside yourself. "Increase our faith," we plead with Jesus. We look at his cross and empty tomb to see that the payment for all sins was finished. His resurrection proved that God the Father accepted the payment. Only when we keep our eyes fixed on Christ do we realize how much he has forgiven me. Then I can forgive, not because I think I can, but because Jesus did.

*When you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.'"*

The "Little Engine That Could" accomplished something very difficult by trying hard and having a good attitude. When we set a great example for a child, when we protect a child from false doctrine and spiritual harm, when we forgive from the heart even seven times in one day to the same person, Jesus reminds us to stay humble. For when we do all these difficult things, the devil is right there to convince us to take a bow, to humbly brag about how good we have been, to expect some special treatment from God, to think that we are better than most Christians. Oh no, we are all unworthy servants. All we receive from the Lord God is by grace, his undeserved love for sinners. For us to avoid leading children into sin, for us to forgive is only what we are supposed to do. We've already received the reward – forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus. What more can we want than for more to receive these gifts of grace?

Amen.