

“Kingdom Character”

Luke 17:1-19

One day St. Francis of Assisi said to several of his followers, “Let’s go to the village over the way and preach.” As they went they met a pedestrian who was greatly burdened. Francis was in no hurry and listened carefully to his tale of woe.

When they finally reached the village, Francis talked with the shopkeepers, spent time with the farmers in the marketplace, and played with the children in the streets. On the way home they met a farmer with a load of hay, and Francis spent some time with him. By then the morning was gone and the group returned the monastery.

One of Saint Francis’ followers was greatly disappointed and said, “Brother Francis, you said you were going to preach. The morning is gone and no sermon has been preached.”

And Francis replied, “But we have been preaching all the way.”

This simple story illustrates a maxim of Saint Francis. He said “Preach the Gospel at all times....and when necessary – use words.” We have a well-known but often forgotten truth that parallels Francis’ maxim; “actions speak louder than words.” In other words, character matters.

As we’ve studied the Gospel of Luke together we’ve been learning about various aspects of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, Jesus taught in parables; at other times His teaching was simple and direct. Our study today centers on Luke 17:1 to 19. Here, Jesus speaks directly to His disciples, using the parable of the unworthy servant and the healing of the lepers, to teach us about the character of those who would be His followers. We will see the prominent role of faith in developing what I’ve called “Kingdom Character.”

Listen carefully now as I read our text, Luke 17:1 to 19, and see if you can pick out the examples of “Kingdom Character.”

Kingdom character is activated by faith in Jesus Christ and stimulated by interaction with others. Kingdom character is illustrated in this text by several distinguishing **TRAITS** we should develop.

The First Kingdom Character TRAIT is,

Sincerity

Jesus begins with a simple but emphatic statement. Offenses must come. Even if you and I strive to live godly lives, we're not perfect; at some point we'll offend someone.

Sincerity is defined as being true, pure, honest, and frank. You and I must acknowledge our imperfections and our failures. We must be the same in private as we are in public. Paul said in Philippians 1:10 that as kingdom citizens we need to *"approve things that are excellent, so we can be sincere, or pure, and (listen) without offense until the day of Christ."*

The word sincere, as used here, couples the idea of the fullness of the sun shining, with judgment or discernment. In other words a person who is sincere can be examined in the full light of the sun and remain blameless. He or she has nothing to hide! They will do whatever is in their power to avoid offending another Believer. Is that how you and I live?

The apostle Paul is an example of this sincerity. In First Corinthians 8 he discusses the issue of meat offered to idols. He acknowledges idols are nothing but a figment of man's imagination. And the meat offered to them, later sold in the marketplace, was of good quality; it was a bargain. But because of the association with idols some Believers thought that meat shouldn't be eaten.

Paul acknowledged that eating the meat, or refusing to eat it, had nothing to do with their standing in Christ. But rather than offend the weak or immature by flaunting his freedom he wrote *"...if what I eat causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to stumble."*

In Romans 14:21 he writes *"It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."* We know he followed his own advice. In his testimony before the Sanhedrin in Acts 24:15 and 16 he said *"...there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a conscience void of offense both before God and before men."*

Jesus points out how dangerous it is to give offense; especially to children or to His followers who are spiritually immature. We have this same teaching in Matthew 18 and there Jesus is holding a little child on His lap.

I've often looked at this verse as punishment for offenses. But this time I noticed it's a concept of prevention, not punishment. Jesus said it would be to our advantage to have a large, upper millstone hung about our neck, and then be hurled violently into the sea. This would **prevent** us from offending one of these little ones. So this is a serious matter we're dealing with. As I read this I was reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:29. *"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell."*

Are you and I willing to give up anything for the sake of the weaker and immature Believers who are part of our local fellowship? Are we truly sincere in seeking the well-being of the body of Christ, the Church? Or are we determined to have our own way and let the chips fall will they will?

I realize there is more to the character trait of sincerity than avoiding offenses, but it is this particular application that Jesus highlights in this text. Does your kingdom character include sincerity that precludes offense?

The Next Kingdom Character TRAIT is,

Generosity

Generosity is a willingness to share with others what God has shared with you and me. It impacts many areas of our lives; but probably none as much as the area that Jesus highlights in our text; forgiveness. And Jesus prefaces his instruction by telling the disciples to "listen up." What He was about to tell them would shock their sense of justice.

The disciples understood the need for forgiveness. So when Jesus told them, in verse 3, to forgive the one who offended them they understood that. In fact, the Rabbis taught that a person should forgive an offender three times...but no more. This conclusion was based on a wrong interpretation and understanding of Amos 1:3.

It was what Jesus said in verse 4 that blew them away! *"If your brother sins against you seven times in one day, and seven times a day he returns to you saying, 'I repent,' you MUST forgive him."* OK, so how would you respond to what Jesus said? Have you ever had to do this? Or are you like me, finding it difficult to forgive someone the same sin twice?

Have you ever said to someone, “you already asked me to forgive you for that sin and now you’ve done it again; I won’t forgive you ‘til I see a change in behavior.” Maybe you’ve never said it, but you probably thought it. I tremble at the thought of God saying that to me. I’d be a lost cause!

God has been so generous to me, yet I find it difficult to allow His generosity to flow through me. I’m like the disciples; I need to pay attention to Jesus’ words, I need to listen up! Too many times I want to see justice served on others, not mercy and forgiveness. Yet I’m so glad for God’s gracious forgiveness of my sins and my failures.

I often forget that generosity fosters more generosity. Jesus said that the measure we use to give to others will be the same measure others use to give to us! He also taught us that refusing to forgive others blocks His forgiveness of our trespasses. So if we refuse to be generous in forgiving, who are we actually hurting?

Instead of being set free by a forgiving spirit we are kept in bondage by bitterness. When we forgive someone there is a release. When we refuse to forgive we allow the person and their offense to actually control our lives. Jesus said freely forgive; I add, so you can be free too.

One of the areas where we develop this character trait is in our families. So many little frictions arise from character flaws, personality differences, and annoying habits. These all give ample opportunities to develop a generous spirit of forgiveness. And yet, we often fail to develop this trait at home. Then we wonder why it’s so difficult to develop and exercise it in our community, or our workplace, or our local church congregation.

I thank God for my wife and my children who are quick to forgive when I acknowledge my failures and my sins against them. God has used them to teach me so much about forgiveness and generosity.

But sincerity and generosity will not be developed unless there is another character trait. And the disciples introduce it with their response to Jesus’ teaching.

That Kingdom Character TRAIT is,

Faith

They said “*Lord, increase our faith.*” To them, this was one of the hard sayings of Jesus. They had already exercised faith, simply by becoming Jesus’ disciples. But these demands of

kingdom character He was teaching them were beyond anything they'd ever been asked to do before. This Rabbi's teaching was different from anything they'd heard before.

What does faith have to do with developing kingdom character? Plenty! And Jesus said if they only had a little faith they could say to the mulberry tree "be plucked up by the roots and be planted in the sea," and it would happen. I know from experience the mulberry tree is notoriously difficult to uproot or destroy. I believe Jesus was focusing on the quality of their faith more than the quantity. Did they trust Him enough to obey what they didn't understand? Do you trust Him enough to do that?

Genuine faith is the ability to embrace as fact things we can't see. Every human being exercises faith every day in the process of living. But many of these same people see faith in spiritual matters as a "blind leap into the dark." But they're wrong! Jesus said "*I am the light of the world: he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*" Faith in Jesus doesn't enable us to understand every circumstance, but it does bring meaning to the otherwise inscrutable things of life.

And in the very familiar John 3:16 Jesus said "*...whoever believes (exercises faith) in me shall not perish but have everlasting life.*" I know this to be true because of my own personal experience and because of the testimony of thousands of other people whose lives have been transformed by the power of the Gospel. A faith that takes God at His Word and acts upon it will not go unrewarded!

If you and I lack faith in God we'll have a narrow view of life. When we have a narrow view of life we tend to focus on self. We think about what's best for us, what we enjoy, and how we can make our life better or easier. A lack of faith says you must look out for yourself because no one else will. But God's Word assures you and me He's always watching out for us. He directs the events of our lives to bless others through us. He orders the events of our lives in a way that will glorify Him. He plans the events of our lives in order to reproduce the character of Christ in us.

When God allows difficulty or offenses in my life I often want to say "wait a minute. This isn't what I had in mind. I think I can manage this better on my own." When I'm offended, it takes faith to believe that God can lead the other person to repentance or, barring that, to settle

the accounts at the judgment. God sees our lives from beginning to end; we only see the moment. Faith trusts Him for the outcome He wants, not what we want.

It also takes faith to develop and exercise generosity; especially generosity in forgiveness! But we're afraid if we forgive, the offender just might wrong us again. Wisdom may require that we remove ourselves from a physically dangerous situation; but often we want to insulate ourselves from the offenses of others. And, we're often fearful of the response if we follow Jesus' instruction to rebuke our offender.

It takes faith to believe that God can use the offenses of others to draw us closer to Him. If you don't believe that read the Psalms. David was unjustly pursued by his enemies. God could have struck them down; every one of them. David even asked God to do that! But God often left David suffer so he learned to put his faith and confidence in Him.

I'm like the disciples. Faith is a kingdom character trait I need more of. How about you?

The Next Kingdom Character TRAIT is,

Humility

Let's suppose the disciples are taking to heart what Jesus said. If they're able to live without offense and extend forgiveness beyond what was normally expected; if the quality of their faith improved dramatically, did that entitle them to special merit in God's eyes? Wouldn't they have something to boast about? The Pharisees believed and taught that God was obligated to reward them for their piety and good deeds. But let's see what Jesus had to say.

In verses 7 to 10 Jesus speaks of a slave's relationship to his master. After the slave has spent all day in the field or pasture, he returns to the house at evening. But his master doesn't tell him to go to his quarters, relax, and enjoy his meal. No; he tells him to get the food ready, change to a fresh set of clothes, and then wait on me until I finish my meal. Then, when you're finished serving me you can go and have your own supper.

When the slave has performed all his duties to the satisfaction of his master, will the master thank him? Jesus says "most certainly not!" And then He continues by saying to the disciples, "...when you have done all these things which are commanded, say 'we are unprofitable slaves; we have only done our duty.'"

What was Jesus saying? When you've done all these things: when you've avoided offending others, when you've forgiven unconditionally, and when you've exercised genuine faith, then, as a disciple, you have only done what's expected. There is no special reward for simply doing what you should. You've only fulfilled your obligations.

Cosmo Lang wrote "the only limit to the servant's duty is his master's will; there is no point at which he can choose for himself to claim he has done enough and is entitled to ease. The servant is always a debtor of service; the master is never a debtor of reward." God will NOT be put in the debt of anyone!

In addition to asking what Jesus meant we also ask why He spoke these words? Was He seeking to counteract the subtle poison of self-righteousness that was creeping into their hearts? They had earlier asked Him about what they would have for following Him; and we know they argued about position. Have you ever had those kinds of prideful thoughts; that because you did or didn't do certain things God should take special notice of you? I have.

Jesus certainly promised rewards for faithful service in other settings. He is not contradicting Himself here. His point is that God is under no obligation to reward us. He will reward us because He chooses to, not because He owes it to us. He will reward us because of His generous love for us and we should serve Him solely on the basis of our love for Him. We have NO merit with God other than the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

My friend, as disciples of the Lord Jesus you and I must develop and exercise the kingdom character trait of humility. The writer of Proverbs says pride is an abomination, a hateful thing, to the Lord; and it leads to destruction. Oh how often we've seen that in our families, our churches, and our communities. The apostle James reminds us that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

If you're a proud person you will surely give offense to others; especially to those weak in faith and you won't care. Your response will be, "If they don't like it, that's tough." Neither will you be able to forgive as Jesus asks us to forgive. You won't ask others for forgiveness because you're not wrong. And you won't grant forgiveness because you see yourself as better than your offenders. If you're proud you won't need faith either. You'll depend on yourself.

The quality of humility helps us see that even after all we've done for God we can never repay the debt we owe. Even if we were able to perform our duty perfectly (and we can't) we're

still destitute of merit before God. He doesn't deal with us on the ground of merit, but on the ground of His grace. The poet, Tennyson, said it well; "...for merit lives from man to man, and not from man, O Lord, to thee."

The Final Kingdom Character TRAIT is,

Gratitude

In this final scene of our text Jesus gives a practical demonstration of kingdom character. And, I might add, one that is closely connected to the others.

Luke sets the stage by giving the general geographic location. Jesus is on His final journey toward Jerusalem where he will be crucified. He's teaching His followers the principles of how to live in the kingdom He's about to inaugurate. Traveling along the border between Galilee and Samaria offers a unique teaching experience.

As Jesus enters a certain village He's met by ten men, all lepers, who call to Him from a distance. Their disease required them to separate themselves from others and to keep away from those who were not leprous. Evidently, these men, including one who was a Samaritan, had found a measure of comfort in their companionship. They had even overcome the natural animosity that existed between Jew and Samaritan.

When they saw Him they cried out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Addressing Jesus as Master indicates a measure of faith in Him. They realized their only hope for healing lay in Jesus' mercy. Faith is the kingdom character trait that precedes all others. And Jesus responded to their faith.

After these men addressed Jesus He told them to go show themselves to the priests. Having heard of Jesus it is possible they expected Him to touch them or simply pronounce them healed. But He didn't do that. Instead, He gave them a test. Would they obey His command?

Normally a command to show oneself to a priest came AFTER the cure. The priestly examination would result in the lepers being able to resume normal lives. But these men could've refused to go. They could've just repeated their request to Jesus. Jesus was testing their faith and obedience. If they truly regarded Him as master, they would obey Him. And they did.

While they were on their way to the priest, they were healed! They believed what Jesus said and acted upon it. Can you imagine their excitement at being healed? They could go back to

their families and community. With the exception of the Samaritan they could attend the synagogue again; they could make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship. They could truly live! All their excitement was legitimate; but they forgot something very important. Out of the ten, only one, a Samaritan, remembered – the importance of gratitude.

When he realized he'd been healed he immediately turned back and with a loud voice gave glory to God. Do you think the others missed him and wondered where he was going? I don't know. Even though he was a part of their group he was still, in a sense, an outsider. His healing wouldn't make him accepted in the synagogue or welcome in Jerusalem. But what he did next reveals he knew something about worship.

He fell on his face before Jesus as praise and thanksgiving spilled out of his spirit, soul, and body. This scene reminds me of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4. He told her His Father was looking for those to worship Him in spirit and in truth; not those who focused on Jerusalem or Mount Gerazim. Inward relationship, not outward religion was what God desired. This Samaritan wouldn't be going to the Temple, but he was worshipping God!

So why did this double outcast, leper and Samaritan, return to thank God? Because He understood He was undeserving of the Lord's mercy! And because he knew he was unworthy it increased his sense of gratitude.

When someone does something for us, if we think we deserve it, or they owe it to us we're not very grateful. But when someone does something totally unexpected, motivated by love and kindness, we're grateful. Like this leper, we must understand we're unworthy of ANY of the Lord's blessings. If God gave us what we deserve it would be death – because of our sin. Only the blood of Jesus Christ applied, by faith, to our hearts makes us worthy in God's sight.

As these events unfolded Jesus turned to the people and said *“didn't I heal ten; where are the other nine? None of them have returned to give glory to God except this foreigner!”* Jesus uses a particular word He'd very likely read on the limestone block from the Temple in Jerusalem which said “Let no foreigner enter within the screen and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary.” And yet, the only one of the ten to return and give thanks was a foreigner; this Samaritan.

Then Jesus said, “*Get up, go on your way; your faith has made you whole.*” I believe this man experienced a healing far greater than the other nine. He was not only healed physically, he was healed spiritually. He truly embraced Jesus as Master and he became a profitable servant.

My friend, are you allowing God through His Spirit, and the circumstances of life, to develop these kingdom character traits in your life? Do you strive to be sincere in all you do, avoiding offense to others as much as possible? Are you quick to forgive, recognizing how much you’ve been forgiven? Do you have enough faith to realize that God is orchestrating the events of your life for your good and His glory?

Are you humbled by the grace and mercy of God which He’s extended to you; initially at your conversion, and then in your daily living? And are you a grateful person? Do realize that anything you receive is not owed to you, but simply a gift from God?

As I close let me remind you that none of these kingdom character traits are possible unless your life has been transformed by the power of the Living Christ. No amount of self-effort will do. These character traits will only be produced and developed in a life that is fully surrendered the control of the Lord. Have you surrendered your life fully to Jesus?