

Luke 17

Overview: In this chapter, ([Luke 17:1-10](#)) the teaching of Jesus is continued by four definite pronouncements, which are perhaps highlights of an extensive discourse, the exact connection of which is difficult to discern, ([Vs. 11-19](#)) the healing of ten lepers, and ([Vs. 20-37](#)) the teaching concerning the second coming of the Lord.

Between [Luke 17:10](#) and [Luke 17:11](#), Jesus made a journey to Jerusalem for the purpose of raising Lazarus from the dead; and yet the only notice of that journey here is found in the words, "As they were on the way to Jerusalem" ([Luke 17:11](#)). The marvelous significance of this will be noted under that verse.

The Four Teachings: Jesus had just finished the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which closed with the implication that the Rich Man had influenced his five brothers to follow a sinful course, an error which he vainly sought to correct from the spirit world. Jesus quite logically moved to warn those yet living against such a sin. Spence agreed that "There does seem to be a clear connection here with the narrative immediately preceding." It appears that there is a unity among the 4 teachings and that they were uttered on one and the same occasion.

The four sayings might be entitled "Four things that the Christian should beware." These were numbered as (1) "the sin of tempting others ([Vs 1-2](#)), (2) the sin of an unforgiving spirit ([Vs 3-4](#)), (3) the sin of overlooking the power of faith in obeying God ([Vs 5-6](#)), and (4) the sin of supposing that one may merit salvation ([Vs 7-10](#)).

The Pharisees were at that very moment trying to cause the Twelve themselves to stumble; and Jesus spoke in the sternest manner against those who would pervert the faith of others.

VS 1-2: This is the first of four sayings, held by many to be independent teachings of Jesus, unconnected with the discourse or circumstance in which Luke has placed them. Of course, if that is what they are, there can be no finding fault with such an arrangement by the sacred historian; because Mark also frequently reported such independent items of Jesus' marvelous teaching. Coffman, however, strongly feels that there is a connection which will be noted in each of the four sayings.

Occasions of stumbling ... The Greek word rendered **STUMBLING** "meant the trigger of a trap, contact with which would cause the trap to spring." Therefore, although addressed to his disciples, this warning far exceeded anything that the Twelve might have needed. It is God's pronouncement of eternal wrath against those who lay a trap to destroy the faith of others.

One of these little ones ... is a reference of Jesus to those who are "babes in Christ," whose faith is young and weak.

Millstone ... The teaching here is that physical death is a far more desirable fate than that which is reserved for those whose intent is to destroy the faith of others. The millstone in view here weighed about forty pounds.

Vs 3-4: Jesus often taught about forgiveness. Just about the longest parable in the New Testament regards this very thing ([Matthew 18:20-35](#)); and there is no need to make Luke's account here a "variable" of other teachings of Jesus in similar words and different circumstances. In fact, there is a little different thing in view here, namely, a warning against withholding forgiveness. Nor can we agree with Wesley that "forgiveness is due only to real penitents." It is foreign to the intent of Jesus to ask, "But what if he does not repent?" ... The follower of Jesus is not justified in holding a spirit of unforgiveness just because no apology is offered. That would put the responsibility for the Christian's attitude upon the offender; and Jesus would never do that.

As a matter of fact, if one is going to forgive only those sinners against himself who repent and request it, He will not forgive anyone ten times in a lifetime! Besides that, what about those cases in which men sin against

others **WITHOUT EVER BEING AWARE** that they have done so? And in religious matters, many sins are committed unintentionally (see [John 16:2](#)).

Vs 5-6: This is the third of the four pronouncements. The apostle's reaction to the command of Jesus for what amounts to unlimited forgiveness appeared to them such a monstrous task that they supposed they needed a special measure of faith to be able to comply with it. The teaching here is that the faith they had was more than enough to enable it, provided only that they got on with the **DOING** of it by putting their faith into action.

What did Jesus mean by this promise? The faith of Christians, without any providential increase of it, is more than enough to enable it to be done.

Miller was correct in affirming that such a wonder as Jesus promised here suggests "that genuine faith can accomplish what experience, reason, and probability would deny, if it is exercised within God's will." Hobbs was sure that no miraculous ability was promised Christians in this; because, "We cannot even transplant violets in a garden, to say nothing of transplanting trees from the land into the sea." Jesus' true meaning is found in the Jewish usage of such extravagant figures of speech. "Rabbis of intellectual eminence were often called 'uprooters of mountains' in allusion to their powers of solving difficult questions"; and Matthew quoted Jesus using the term "mountain" in this same context on another occasion. This, of course, is the same figure and should be understood spiritually.

Vs 7-10: This remarkable parable is clearly a lesson designed to teach humility, obedience, and a sense of lacking any merit in the sight of God. The apparent connection in context is this: the apostles contemplating the marvelous spiritual attainments indicated by Jesus' promise that they had the faith to move trees into the sea would naturally be tempted to pride and vainglory by such envisioned achievements. This parable was to show that no man can merit salvation.

This parable is hailed by Trench as one of "great difficulty"; especially because it presents the relationship of Jesus and his followers in a much sterner aspect than in most of His teachings. Did the Lord not say, "I have called you friends," and that "no longer do I call you servants"? ([John 15:15](#)). While this is true, Paul did not hesitate to call himself the "bondservant" of Jesus ([Romans 1:1](#)); and this sterner aspect of the Christian's relationship to the Lord needed stress then, and it needs it now. For example, the glaring misuse of this parable surfaces in a comment like this: "Men who only carry out God's commands have no claim on any reward!" Jesus said, "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments" ([Matthew 19:17](#)); and there is absolutely nothing in this parable to indicate that the obedient servant was denied his true reward. As a matter of fact, there was never a servant on earth who did "all that was commanded," as did this one; and therefore he should be called the "hypothetical servant," for that is exactly what he is, as indicated by the supposition (for the sake of the hypothesis) that the twelve apostles would have been bondservants ([Luke 17:7](#))! It is the failure to discern this key fact that has confused the commentators.

The message of this hypothetical servant is that even if any person whosoever, Jew or Gentile, should actually do "all that was commanded", he would not by such obedience place Almighty God in a position of being debtor to him. Salvation is by grace. No man ever did, or ever could, merit God's redeeming love; but, make no mistake about it, this is no promise that God will overlook the principle of obedience in them that hope to be saved. If one performing all that God commanded, if such a thing were possible, is saved by grace, as appears here, how utterly beyond redemption is that man who fancies that there is no requirement for him to obey?

Man can never repay God's natural blessings, much less those bestowed by grace. Man cannot earn heaven.

The fourth teaching may be summarized in this way: "This rebukes the self-satisfied Christian who thinks that in obeying God he has done something especially meritorious."

LUKE 17:11-21

Vs 11: On the way to Jerusalem ... This is the third and final of the three references in this long section of Luke, in which it is mentioned that they were on the way to Jerusalem. The three references to the fact that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem are [Luke 9:51](#); [Luke 13:22](#), and this verse [Luke 17:11](#). If we look at John's accounts of Jesus' travels, we will notice that they are in perfect harmony with Luke's accounts of three journeys towards Jerusalem.

John gives us three journeys, - the Feast of the Tabernacles ([John 7:2](#)), the journey to raise Lazarus ([John 11:17](#)), and the final Passover ([John 12:1](#)). Luke likewise three times in this section speaks of Jesus going to Jerusalem ([Luke 9:51](#); [Luke 13:22](#); and [Luke 17:11](#)). These journeys correspond with one another harmonizing the two Gospel writers' accounts.

There was, of course, one mighty, well-coordinated journey to Jerusalem during the last few months of Jesus' ministry; and all throughout this long section, Luke deals with what Jesus did in that thorough campaign. Jesus interrupted the journey to go into Jerusalem on specific missions, each time returning to take up the final campaign as before. Between verses 10 and 11, Jesus had gone to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, after which he withdrew for a while to Ephraim in the hills north of Jerusalem, later going through Samaria to the border of Galilee to resume that campaign trip to Jerusalem.

Along the borders of Samaria and Galilee ... What Jesus did was to go through Samaria (first) and then to the border of Galilee to the point where he took up the "journey."

When the Passover was approaching, Jesus went from that region (Ephraim, [John 11:54](#)) northward through Samaria into the southern and southeastern part of Galilee, so as to fall in with the pilgrims going from Galilee through Perea to Jerusalem. We again combine Luke's account with that of John and see easy agreement.[19]

Thus, [Luke 17:11](#) appears as one of the key references in understanding the harmony of the Gospel accounts. Inter-related with the corresponding passages in John, Luke's mention of Jesus' going to Jerusalem is understood as accurately related to the three great journeys of the Gospel of John.

Vs 17: Sadness seems to have been the dominant emotion as Jesus contemplated the ingratitude of the nine lepers.

How could men be so thoughtless and unappreciative of God's favors?

Why, it may be asked, did the nine not return?

Here are nine possible reasons: **1-**One waited to see if the cure was real. **2-**One waited to see if it would last. **3-**One said he would see Jesus later. **4-**One decided that he had never had leprosy. **5-**One said he would have gotten well anyway. **6-**One gave the glory to the priests. **7-**One said, O well, Jesus didn't really **DO** anything. **8-**One said, just any rabbi could have done it. **9-**One said, "I was already much improved."

"How often do the love and life of the pardoned sinner fail to respond to the grace that saved him!"

These lepers had come to Jesus in the extremity of a most loathsome and pitiful disease; they pleaded with him to help, and he healed them; but nine of them never even said, "Thanks." Barclay developed a sermon on ingratitude from this text stressing: (1) the ingratitude of children to their parents, (2) the ingratitude toward our fellow men, and (3) man's ingratitude toward God.

Except this stranger ... This very word, "foreigner" is found on the limestone block from the temple of Israel in Jerusalem. It was placed in the court of the Gentiles next to the Court of the Women. "Let no foreigner enter," it said. Alas, a foreigner might not be permitted to enter the Jewish part of the temple (upon penalty of death); but one "foreigner," or "stranger," found grace with the Lord of creation!

Vs 20: Being asked by the Pharisees ... Some have made it out that these were sincere questioners; but all the evidence is against it. "Their question amounted to a request for a `sign from heaven'." This is a clear rejection of the `signs' Jesus had already performed, and of what he had already said upon the subject. The view here is that these old enemies of Jesus were up to their old tricks. "The question was probably a mocking one, `When is this kingdom of God, of which you claim to be King, visibly to appear?'"

Comes not with observation ... means that the kingdom would not visibly appear at all. There would be no proclamation of a king, in the political sense, no definition of boundaries, no setting up of any kind of material state at all.

The kingdom of God is within you ... W. E. Vine particularly stressed that, in **Luke 17:21** "in the midst of," is to be preferred. The kingdom of God was not in the hearts of the Pharisees!"

The contention of some critics that the Savior by these words taught that the kingdom of God is merely an inner, spiritual condition in the human heart, must very definitely be rejected. Such a condition may qualify for entrance into the kingdom, but it is not itself the kingdom ... It is not ... a state of mind ... nor a disposition of men. The kingdom of God is a fact of history, not psychology ... Jesus speaks everywhere of men entering the kingdom, not of the kingdom entering men!"

Luke 17:22-37

Vs. 22-37 - Look here ... look there ... In the next paragraph (vs. [22-37](#)), Jesus explained that the external, visible "signs" so desired by the Pharisees were to be seen, not during the forthcoming kingdom of God, but at the Second Advent. We agree with Barclay that "these verses speak of the Second Coming of Jesus." [35] That there are, in the very nature of such a passage, difficulties that we cannot fully understand should not deter us. The things here prophesied shall surely come to pass.

Verse 22 is a reference to the present time, during which Christians, oppressed by temptations and tribulations, will, like the Pharisees of old, desire to see just such cataclysmic events as they wanted to see, and which they erroneously understood would usher in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus shows here that those great physical, cataclysmic disorders and cosmic signs shall indeed come to pass (at the Second Coming,) but not at that time. Like the martyred saints, Christians who find themselves a hated minority in society, reviled, and set at naught by a hostile secular world, will cry, "How long?" ([Revelation 6:10](#)); but the end is not yet.

Verses 23-24 The phrase here is clear enough. The Second Coming of Christ will be an event that all men alive at that time will see and recognize instantly. It will in no manner resemble the concealed, unrecognized coming of the Savior in the First Advent. Like a stroke of lightning at midnight, saints and sinners alike shall see it; The Second Advent will be bad news for the vast majority of mankind; but it will not be the kind of news any man will be able to ignore.

Verses 26-29 Significantly, these were cataclysmic physical disasters. The Dead Sea today lies on the site of the cities of the plain which were destroyed by the cataclysm mentioned here. The ravages of the flood were genuine, worldwide, and attested not merely in the word of God, but by the legends of fabled Atlantis and many others. Moreover, there is hardly a hill on earth that does not show signs of once having been beneath the sea.

The fact that Jesus selected these two great physical phenomena from the Old Testament, making them comparable to the Second Advent, is a clear word that the Second Advent will also be such a physical thing; a cataclysm of unbelievable and unprecedented destruction; and that in the midst of the Great Disaster, the Son of man will appear to redeem the faithful from the earth, who shall be caught up with the "Lord in the air" (see [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)). Men either believe this or they don't; and this writer, striving to read the word of the Lord correctly, **BELIEVES** it, with no pretensions whatever of being able to **EXPLAIN** it.

We shall not detail all of the incidents relative to Noah and Lot; those Old Testament narratives should be well known to every Christian; and the lesson here is not what happened to those generations, but what is going to happen to all the world and the generation that is alive when the Lord returns.

Vs. 30 - Both in the case of Noah, and that of Lot, God's people were taken away from the scene of Judgment before it occurred." [37] Paul indicated that the same will be the case with Christians when the final Disaster falls ([1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)).

Other analogies which we are perhaps justified in drawing are: (1) faith will virtually have ceased on earth; (2) men will be busy in the same old ways, pursuing their same old interests; (3) materialism will have won the minds of men; (4) the utmost security shall be felt by men; (5) all appeals regarding the worship of God shall be scoffed at; (6) the Second Coming shall be an instantaneous thing, like lightning; (7) it shall be worldwide, occurring everywhere simultaneously, and therefore involving the totality of the earth and its enveloping atmosphere; (8) the Christians shall be caught up out of the "fire storm" and shall suffer no harm from it; (9) Jesus and his holy angels shall deliver them; they shall ever be with the Lord. These analogies, some of which are in the text here, and some of which have been imparted into it from the writings of Paul, are all nevertheless true.

Vs 31-32 - Jesus used some of this teaching when he gave the combined answers regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world; but here it is their application to the latter event which is in view, the application being, not so much to the prohibiting of anyone's wishing to turn back **AFTER** the Great Event has begun to unfold, as it is to the **PRIOR** temptation to turn back, in their hearts, to secular and material things, even as Lot's wife did, a temptation that will be unusually strong in the society that shall prevail at the end.

Vs 33 - This is a reiteration of the gospel message to all people. Those who run their lives as they please shall be lost. Those who submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ shall be saved.

Vs 34-36 - **In that night ...** contrasts with "in that day" ([Luke 17:31](#)); and some of the ancient skeptics scoffed at the idea that Jesus' coming could be both at night and in the daytime also; but present knowledge of the fact that it is always night on part of the earth, and always day on the other part, has eliminated the question from the writings of modern critics.

Shall be taken ... shall be left ... Which of these refers to the saved, which to the unsaved? From [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#), it would appear that the saved are the ones who shall be "taken."

Vs 37 - This enigmatic statement is difficult of understanding; and perhaps it was not intended to be otherwise. Even the word "eagles" is stoutly maintained by some to be "vultures," and other scholars, as in the English Revised Version (1885), insist on translating it "eagles."

The body ... In all probability, this refers to the body of mankind, at last completely dead in sin, demanding by their sins and rebellion against God that the final judgment be executed upon them; just as a dead body would draw vultures, so humanity that is morally dead will inevitably draw the judgment of God upon them. "As surely as a carcass draws birds of prey, so sin would draw judgment, and there would the Messiah be found." [39] Also Bruce wrote, "Where there is a situation ripe for divine judgment, the executors of that judgment will unerringly find it out, just like vultures find the carrion." [40] However, it should be remembered that Jesus was not here speaking of just any situation ripe for judgment, but of the final and terminal situation with the posterity of Adam, when at last, their day of grace expired, God shall make an end of all human probation, summoning all people to the judgment of the Great White Throne.