

Four slices of humble pie

Luke 17:1-10

An interviewer once put it to Donald Trump: 'You're not known to be a humble man...' The President responded: 'I think I am humble, actually. I think I'm more humble than you would understand.'

Now, it only takes a moment to realise just how ironic and self-defeating that comment is. It takes seconds to see a lack of humility in someone else, especially a prominent person. But it takes far longer to recognise a lack of humility in yourself.

In Luke 17:1-10, Jesus keeps going with the challenging teaching that's been streaming out since we picked Luke up again at chapter 13 after the summer holidays. Everything that Jesus teaches in this passage is hard to live out.

There is teaching about causing other people to sin; about how we are to respond when others sin against us; about greatness of faith; and about how we are to position ourselves in relationship with God. And the common thread between these teachings is: humility.

Jesus is teaching humility *into* His disciples. He offers you four slices of humble pie to eat and digest. He teaches that humility as His follower doesn't look like proclaiming 'I am so humble.' Nor does it look like shrinking down and thinking 'I am just rubbish.'

There are four really concrete ways that Jesus wants to see His followers express humility in their worldview and in their actions. We're going to take a slice at a time, and see if you're going to swallow it.

In vv.1-3, *Jesus teaches that humility swaps round who is at the centre of our spiritual concerns.* As His disciples, we can get so focused on 'Have I sinned? Am I sinning now? What do I need to do to make sure I'm okay with God?' There's a very individualistic 'me and God' thing going on thinking about your life and your actions, such that nobody else is on your radar.

'How are my life and actions affecting *other people's* walk with God?' For most of us, it's not the first question on our minds, and for many of us, it's not even on our minds at all. Jesus teaches His disciples to move over from the middle and let the weaker ones in.

In v.2, when Jesus refers to not causing 'these little ones' to sin, the 'little ones' He's referring to must be the people He's been talking about since He started addressing these crowds back in chapter 14 - the poor, the marginalised, the lost causes, the broken, the forgotten, the written off, the 'sinners', the outcasts.

'How are my life and actions affecting *their* walk with God? Am I doing anything that's causing them to sin?' It's worth weighing up, because Jesus spells out graphic punishment in v.2 - a millstone around the neck drowning you and drowning you - and He says that's *better* than what's coming to you if you cause these 'little ones' to sin.

Some Bible commentators say that this is really talking about the big stuff that deliberately pushes people to deny Jesus - threatening Christians with death, torture or imprisonment if they don't give up their faith; harming people in such a way that they could never believe in the grace of Jesus.

In our time, there are great evils that cause little ones to sin: human trafficking, prostitution and pornography rings, drugs cartels, powerful businesses choosing corrupt practices and fostering violent or inhumane conditions. Woe to those who wield the power and make the choices there.

But there is also a disposition of the heart towards humility that is called for in every disciple of Jesus. To become like Paul, who once actually did persecute Christians with death and imprisonment, but turned from that to worship Jesus and to teach that if eating something causes another to sin, don't eat it; and to cry out to God that if he himself being cut off from God might mean his lost community being made safe with God, so be it.

That's true humility. Move-over-from-the-middle humility, that loves those who are younger in faith and less resourced in the world so much that it takes care to check: 'How do *my* actions affect *their* walk with Jesus?'

Is there something that needs to obviously change in your life to free others from walking the wrong way?

In vv.3-4, *Jesus teaches that humility exposes wrongdoing, and then forgives it.* The second part of v.3 is a master class in relational conflict in a dozen words. It's simply put, but difficult to live out. In fact, it seems almost naive of Jesus to reduce dealing with how we've been hurt to an if-then formula. 'IF your brother sins, THEN rebuke. IF he repents, THEN forgive him.' Then v.4 says, 'Repeat on a loop.'

‘Come on, Jesus... Don’t you know that life’s more complicated than that? It’s not so black and white, and we can’t handle relationships with something that looks like a command in a computer programme.’

Can’t we? The thing is, what Jesus gives to His disciples here *is* both a *command* and a *programme* for forgiveness. And the only way we can swallow this teaching is if we swallow the humble pie that comes with it. The humility that recognises that God deeply challenges our sin, and forgives it just as deeply when we have admitted it and turned from it.

If we depend on Jesus being completely consistent in rebuking and forgiving us in precisely this way, why would we as His family not treat each other and those around us in the same way? The prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord’s Prayer, assumes that we’ll be as consistent about this as He is: ‘Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.’

Here’s how these things normally work: Someone hurts you. Depending on your temperament, you let it go by - maybe once, maybe twice, maybe a dozen times. Eventually though, it comes up that they hurt you. In the best of times, forgiveness is offered, and you start again. In the worst of times, the relationship is remoulded without forgiveness, never to be as whole again.

‘The best of times’ doesn’t happen often though. And there’s a limit on it. ‘It’s happened too many times now. I can’t forgive them again.’ There’s a frustration that, for all that they keep saying sorry, they still keep doing it. So eventually, the forgiveness runs out with the patience.

Here’s how Jesus teaches us to do it, though: Someone hurts you. You bite the bullet to address that with them - to tell them, ‘you’re doing this, and it’s wrong.’ Sin is that which is contrary to God’s revealed will - so you show them how what they’re doing to you runs against God’s Word. That’s the rebuke.

Then you wait to see how they respond. If it’s with a soft heart, broken and willing to say, ‘I’m sorry’, then don’t hesitate a second to say: ‘That’s okay.’ Usually, that suffices, but always, it’s important for them to hear it, because in that moment they are tender; they have made themselves vulnerable to you. For the little things, ‘I forgive you’ sounds a little condescending, but for the big things, those three words are the most incredibly powerful, liberating and life-changing words they can hear.

If it's with a hard heart, an unwillingness to apologise and change direction, then it is not your responsibility to forgive. That's perfectly consistent with how God deals with people too. But to give people the opportunity to change, to be repentant and start again with you, you have to confront them with the rebuke in the first place.

And you don't get to run out of forgiveness for them. Even if they hurt you the same way seven times in the day, and each time say 'I'm sorry', it's on *you* to forgive *them*. v.4 says so in as many words. That's counter-cultural, it's beyond human, it's ridiculously vulnerable. But it is the way that you want forgiveness from Jesus (and the way you actually experience it). And so it is the way that Jesus commands you to forgive in turn.

There are situations where harm is done where it's important not to misunderstand this teaching. Abuse of any kind. Neglect. Fraud. Assault. If anyone is affected by such things, can I encourage you to speak with me about how we live out rebuke and forgiveness in these circumstances. But to offer one comment just now: Jesus calls for rebuke before forgiveness. And where crime is involved, the necessary rebuke will involve the law.

This powerful programme for forgiveness requires humility. To rebuke with the *hope* and the *intention* of offering forgiveness is quite different from rebuking someone with no desire to forgive them. And humility is the difference between these things. The humility to know that a) you've been rebuked and forgiven in just the same way by Jesus and b) He's in charge of how you handle your relationships, not you.

To forgive without first rebuking lacks humility too. It is to imagine that the person who wronged you, only wronged *you*. That all that's needed is your decree that 'ach, it's alright.' You become the god of the situation, dispensing or withholding mercy as you see fit. But you know what's wrong with that picture, don't you? *You're not God.*

If this person has sinned against you, they have *sinned*. That means, they have done something wrong in God's sight. They need to have that put in front of them. So they can talk to God about it, too. So that your expression of forgiveness doesn't become the only one, or even the primary one. So that in coming to God about their behaviour, they can see their character change such that other people won't be hurt the way you have been.

In what situations do you 'run out of forgiveness'? How will Jesus' teaching here equip you to handle those hurts in the future?

This life of following Jesus that Simon and Sheena have themselves committed to, and that they today committed to discipling their children into, is not easy. But Thompson family, should you (like us) find it's tough to live a life where Jesus is Lord, know that you're in good company. In our passage, the disciples finally fold. They buckle under the weight of all this challenging teaching that Jesus has relentlessly proclaimed since He began addressing the crowds back in chapter 14.

Counting family as nothing compared to Jesus and making everything else second to Him; recognising the sacrifice involved in following Jesus; welcoming unsavoury sinners into His community as treasured people; thinking of money as not theirs but God's to invest; investing it in making friends with and blessing the poor; finding that Jesus hasn't come to lower the ethical bar but raise it; and discovering that there's an eternal destiny for them that gets defined in *this* life.

All of that, along with 'don't cause others to sin or a fate worse than a Godfather style execution awaits you' and 'forgive incessantly, forgive until it hurts...' It's just too much. In v.5, the apostles (that's the 12 guys set apart as the leaders of this earliest Christian community) - these *leaders* say, 'Increase our faith, Jesus! We don't have enough of it for all this!'

That seems to be what they mean here: 'We're not big enough to walk in these shoes.' But we're not actually told. It might be, 'Help us overcome the doubts about you that are creeping in!' Or, 'Help us discover more, we can see so little!' But Jesus' response in v.6 suggests that this is to do with our actions - the living out of our faith in Him.

Jesus' response troubled me since I was a little boy. I'll bet I'm not the only one. 'If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it will obey you.' Why did that trouble me? Because I thought to myself, 'I haven't got faith that can do *that!* So I mustn't really have faith the way Jesus means it!'

Two things will help us here: Some Jewish context, and another slice of humble pie. This image of a mulberry tree being uprooted and replanted was a Jewish proverbial idea about doing great things, things beyond expectation. We sometimes talk like Paul did in 1 Corinthians 13 about 'a faith that can move mountains.'

It's not that we need to miraculously shift huge blocks of nature around to know that our faith is real. It's that real faith can see huge, enormous, unexpected things occur, shift, transform. And the point Jesus makes is, the *amount* of faith you have doesn't matter at all. It's only the person you have *faith in*.

Jesus teaches that humility focuses on the greatness of our God instead of the greatness of our faith. He reminds us that all these great and impossibly high teachings about being His disciple are increasingly possible in our lives because God is at work in and through us.

The credit goes to Him. The big wins of faith aren't because you worked hard to grow; but they're in His hand and His timing. The frustrations and impasses of faith need to be left in His hands too - things will change when the God we trust in causes them to.

Jesus uses the mustard seed as the measure of the smallest thing. The smallest amount of faith can see the same great things happen as the greatest amount. Tom Wright gives us a helpful explanation of it:

'It's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God. Faith is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God that your faith is looking out on.'

When you're troubled by the question, 'Is my faith big enough?' you're expressing some humility, of course. But you're one step away from the humility that will free you and enable you to live out the faith Jesus teaches. To worry about whether you have a big enough faith is to make who you are and what you do the centre of it. Again, Jesus says, 'Move over, and put God at the centre of what your faith is.'

'It's not the amount of your faith, but the object of your faith that counts.' How would thinking that way change things for you?

Finally, *Jesus teaches that humility does not presume on a reward from God.* vv.7-10 aren't about how God treats us. We know from other parables that God gushes, 'well done, good and faithful servant!' to His children at work for His Kingdom. We know from the cross of Christ that God prefers our needs to His comfort, and does lay Himself down for His servants before they ever lift a finger for Him.

The point of these verses, as Jesus says in v.10, is how we should treat God. And it's as people who recognise that God does not owe us a thing. When we have poured ourselves out to live out costly faith; when we have answered His call to 'go'; when we have prayed, given, sung and served ourselves empty, we will conclude - I'm doing nothing out of the ordinary for a son or daughter adopted into God's family.

When we grow as Christians - we increase in prayer and Bible reading; we step out in faith; we deepen our sacrifices - how tempting is it to think, 'Surely now God, you'll make the next interview go well, or the next scan be all clear. Surely now, you'll finally say 'yes' to that prayer, or make things that have felt hellish become smoother and more manageable.

Jesus checks our expectations here. 'You forget your place, young man, young woman.' A final slice of humble pie to digest. You have no claim on God; He owes you nothing. And when we are humble enough to remember that, happily that frees us from a lot of things that get ruled out.

It rules out bitterness and bargaining, both of which attitudes can cause us to draw away from God. It rules out spiritual league tabling, where we compare how we're doing and what we deserve with other Christians around us - because the answer is, in all the different ways we serve, nobody deserves any more from God than anyone else. And it rules out making kings and queens of ourselves, because we recognise that there's only One King around here, and that's God.

Actually, when we're freed of all those ideas, we can live a lighter, less burdened faith that delights in simply serving the God who incredibly actually did serve us first - in life, and death, and resurrection.

This God - Jesus Christ - far from causing others to sin, did all in His eternal power to cause others to be *freed* from sin. Far from running out of forgiveness, He forgives time and time and time again. Far from depending on His own spirituality, He modelled a total dependence on His Father God and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. And far from presuming anything from God, He lay down His life in exhausting service and a raw, exposed death without so much as a 'can I have a moment's peace, God?'

The God-Man whom we follow practiced what He preached here. The question is whether you will eat four slices of humble pie so that you can practice it too.