

Stories from the Road #9

Stories Jesus tells as he is on his way to die outside Jerusalem^a

¹ Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones^b to stumble. ³ So watch yourselves.

"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke^c them; and if they repent^d, forgive them. ⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith^e!" ⁶ He replied, "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.

⁷ "Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?' ⁸ Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?' ⁹ Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:1-10)^f

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from the passage?

Q. Which character in these stories do you most identify with?

Q. What question would you like to ask Jesus?

^a Luke interviews eyewitnesses and writes his biography of Jesus to a particular person. "I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:4). In other words, he wants to add confirmation to what Theophilus already believes about Jesus.

^b 'Little ones' is an expression Jesus sometimes uses to refer to his disciples/followers.

^c To rebuke someone is to express sharp disapproval or criticism of that person's behaviour or actions.

^d To repent here is to express sincere regret or remorse about one's sin / wrongdoing.

^e The words faith, trust and rely (on) all have the same root meaning.

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At first glance these four sayings of Jesus could appear unrelated to each other – a random collection that Luke the author has strung together. However there is a common thread, and that is Jesus teaching his disciples about how to relate to each other in a world that has been scarred by sin/wrong-doing.

Firstly, Jesus warns his disciple about how NOT to relate to each other: one disciple should not cause other disciples to stumble. “To stumble” is just another way of “to sin”. To sin is to go against all that God stands for. The picture of it being better to “be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck” than to cause another disciple to stumble highlights both how serious sin is and why his disciples should go out of their way to not cause someone else to sin.

Second, Jesus tells his disciples how to relate to other disciples who wrong them. It is a two-stage process. The first step is to rebuke the person who has wronged them – to bring their behaviour (and the wrongness of it) to their attention. The aim of rebuking someone is identified in step two: forgiveness. If the person repents then they are to be forgiven. The call to do these seven times is symbolic. The sense of it is: forgive needs to be generous. Forgiveness is not about keeping a record of wrongdoing.

In light of these hard teachings, it is no wonder that the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith/trust. The question is: faith or trust in whom? It could be trust of others because forgiving someone multiple times is going to require a large amount of trust to continue to live peaceably with them. Or it could be trust in God. In this case, trusting that God is a good ruler who will see that justice is done also requires a large amount of faith, rather than simply seeking revenge themselves.

Jesus’ comment about small faith uprooting a mulberry tree isn’t to be taken literally (if it was then it would make landscaping much less laborious than it is!) Rather Jesus is saying that only a small amount of trust is needed to start the seemingly impossible task of forgiving – given that forgiveness is what Jesus has just been talking about.

Finally, Jesus’ saying about the servants doing their duty is about his disciples having the right perspective on this way of living. When they get it right – even in tough times - they shouldn’t resort to pride because they are only doing what is expected of them.

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from what you have just read?

Q. In what way has this story confirmed or challenged your understanding of Jesus?

Q. What do you want to take away and ponder further?