

# LUKE 17

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## **Luke 17:1–4. Forgiving Offenses**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 777–778.*

The freshness of an early morning, with its new light and fragrant promise of events in the coming day, compares to the cleanness that comes to one forgiven by God or by another. A similar cleanness washes over the person who forgives, removing the cankers of grudge and ill feeling. The Savior seems to be aiming at these freshening experiences when He warns us of causing offenses and, on the other side of the matter, pleads for us to forgive unendingly those who do offend. He underscores the serious character of causing offense by painting a vivid scene of a millstone tied to a person and then thrown into the sea. Though He does not spell out here the disastrous consequences of not forgiving another, elsewhere He pointedly warns that “he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin” (Doctrine and Covenants 64:9).

In these verses Luke’s report briefly reconnects to the accounts of Mark and Matthew, for their Gospels feature sayings of Jesus that deal with offenses and forgiveness:

- “Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea” (Mark 9:42)
- “Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6)
- “It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh” (Matthew 18:7)

- “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault . . . if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matthew 18:15)
- “Peter . . . said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? . . . Jesus saith unto him, . . . Until seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21–22)

In each of these instances, the setting differs notably from Luke’s context of Jesus’s teaching during His journey to Jerusalem (Luke 17:11). The references to offensive actions and to the accompanying need for forgiveness plainly point back to the situation of the rich man who imperiously omits acts of generosity toward the poor man Lazarus and then finds himself in a troublesome situation in the next life. Even noting the differences in settings, it is possible to argue, as some commentators do, that the sayings in the three Gospels tie together. But not all are convinced and accordingly hold out the distinct possibility that Luke’s version of Jesus’s words may be independent and thus refer to a different setting entirely, repeating similar teachings delivered on different occasions.

## **Luke 17:5–10. Faith and Obedience**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 783–784.*

What starts as the Apostles’ lofty appeal for increased faith ends in a deep well of duty and obedience. Rather than meeting their request for more abundant faith, the Savior leads them to faith of a higher quality. Instead of granting to the Twelve a ready reservoir of trust in God, Jesus bequeaths to them a memorable illustration that genuine faith, to be effective, must be accompanied by fulfilled responsibilities. In the place of faith alone as a principle of action and spiritual sustenance, He hands to the Twelve a rock-rending hammer of work. His kingdom will not rest on a soft foundation of wish, good intention, and trust alone. As with His ministry, His continuing work will sit solidly on faith paired with effort.

The flourish that draws attention to obedience and duty arises partly out of what we can observe so far about Jesus’s own ministry. Of course, His is one of performance and action. But the illustration that opens by comparing the Apostles to the master of a servant and closes by likening them to “unprofitable servants” mirrors His own history, bringing a living, vital force to His words. For He comes from a place where He was master and He now toils as a servant. In the words of the hymn quoted by the Apostle Paul, Jesus is “in the form of God” and then takes “upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” Thereafter, “God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:6–7, 9). The prize for the Apostles and for all others—that of exaltation—stands forth in this set of lines. Said another way, the day will come when the master will serve the servants (Luke 12:36–38; compare Isaiah 58:9).

To be sure, Jesus does not diminish the power and value of faith. On the contrary, the promise of growth inherent in the small mustard seed and its realization in a mature tree, though unseen in its seed-like state, shape the unparalleled and essential character of faith that has to begin at some point in a person’s heart (compare Luke 13:18–19; Alma 32:27–43). Further, He drives home its enormous power when He declares that one who possesses “faith as a grain of mustard seed . . . might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up . . . and . . . planted in the sea; and it should obey” (Luke 17:6). These words remind us of other sayings—for instance, in the setting of the disciples’ failed attempt to cast out a devil from a boy: “Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove” (Matthew 17:20). Mark preserves a similar saying uttered when the disciples notice the fig tree that Jesus cursed on the prior day: “Verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, . . . and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe . . . he shall have whatsoever he saith” (Mark 11:23). Although some commentators urge that each of these sayings goes back to a common source, reason can recommend all as independent sayings that Jesus utters on different occasions.

### **Luke 17:11–19. Cleansing Ten Lepers**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 789–790.*

In a story that only Luke preserves, the Savior meets the desperate needs of ten lepers in both temporal and eternal terms and, not incidentally, responds again to the request of the Apostles to increase their faith (Luke 17:5). For within His compassionate words to the one returning leper, “Thy faith hath made thee whole,” Jesus holds together both salvation and physical wholeness. And both components are driven forward by faith.

To illustrate, we ask, How does faith appear in this account of the healing of lepers? To be sure, Jesus draws attention to faith (Luke 17:19). But how does faith insert itself into this narrative? In answer, we notice the willing obedience of the lepers to begin the journey to the priests without further ado. Obviously, they trust Jesus’s instruction, and this trust is the key. In a word, the action of these blighted individuals shows their belief, overtly and firmly tying act and faith together. For “as they went, they were cleansed” (17:14). There is a second part.

Obviously, all ten do exactly as Jesus instructs—that is, go to the priests, an action that has the effect of cleansing them. But only one is “made . . . whole” (17:19). It is this leper who returns to Jesus and, after giving glory to God, thanks Him (17:15–16). The stunning conclusion? People can do as the Lord instructs and receive the promised blessings (Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21), but only those who purposely seek Him out, in gratitude, will be made whole in the ultimate, celestial sense, a point made plain in

modern scripture: “He who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious” (Doctrine and Covenants 78:19; also 46:32).

Luke’s grasp of geography comes into play as he introduces this story, for he writes that as Jesus “went to Jerusalem, . . . he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee” (17:11). His unexpected phrasing leads a reader to envision Jesus moving back and forth between the territories of Samaria and Galilee as He journeys toward Jerusalem. But, one might urge with good reason, traveling to Jerusalem entails going southward from Galilee into Samaritan territory and not vice versa. In effect, it seems that Luke exhibits little grasp of the geographical layout of the two territories, a common criticism. But because his geographical and topographical details in early stories about Jesus’s ministry match the countryside precisely, we should not dismiss his other geographical notations. The possibility that this experience may have occurred earlier in Jesus’s journey and thus near the border of the two territories is certainly open for discussion. But if Jesus is indeed following a meandering route from village to village and not following a direct path to the capital city, instead meeting with and talking to and blessing as many people as He can, then Luke’s notation that He is still passing “through the midst of Samaria and Galilee,” through the border towns, carries validity. For territorial borders in those days are not always as firm as maps may lead us to believe. One main question is whether a certain town is inhabited mostly by Galileans or by Samaritans. Such a feature, largely immeasurable except in the cases of Gentile versus Jewish towns, does not go onto modern maps of the region.

Another possibility rises to view. In the early verses of Luke 4 that feature the devil’s temptations of Jesus, Luke seems to detach Jesus’s experience from specific places. Luke may also be casting the story here into a timeless setting that lacks concrete connections to place, except for injecting the sense that Jesus is moving from town to town. Luke thereby universalizes Jesus’s movement and teachings and sets them into a realm to which all can relate.<sup>1</sup>

## **Luke 17:20–37. Second Coming**

*The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 800–803.*

With these verses, Luke allows us a peek into the breathtaking panoramic sweep of the Savior’s teachings about the end-time: “the days of the Son of man,” “the day when the Son of man is revealed,” the day when the person who “shall lose his life shall preserve it,” the day when “the eagles [shall] be gathered together.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing deeply on the image of “the day of the Lord” from the Old Testament prophets, which bulges with both threats and promises, Jesus weaves together a stunning warning to the spiritually obtuse about sudden destruction, coupled with a warming promise that because He knows the hearts of

each person, He will take the individuals into His kingdom who respond to Him by diminishing the importance of this world's goods as, sadly, "Lot's wife" does not (Luke 17:32).

Perhaps most surprising is Luke's placement of these teachings during the Savior's journey to Jerusalem, long before Jesus enters the city. There the beauty of the temple apparently acts as a catalyst, first, for His words about Jerusalem's looming fate and thereafter His words about the end-time.<sup>3</sup> Because much in chapter 17 resembles Jesus's words recorded in Mark 13, presumably one of Luke's sources for Jesus's teachings on these topics, and because other parts resemble His words reported in Matthew 24, some judge that after Jesus arrives in the capital city, Luke himself has created a new combination of Jesus's words and a new context. But in light of Doctrine and Covenants 45:22–23, it is just as reasonable to see His teaching here as part of His training efforts with the disciples before He reaches the hectic and drama-filled days in Jerusalem.

Although some commentators challenge the unity of the two verses that precede Luke 17:22–37, the persistent portrait of the end of days that runs throughout Jesus's remarks and the instruction not to speculate about that coming era argues for a notable, common occasion when He outlines this very important part of His teaching.

Jesus Himself underlines the significance of the end of time in His teaching by His lengthy treatment of the subject in His later sermon to members of the Twelve on the Mount of Olives.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Savior inspires the Prophet Joseph Smith to make extensive changes in the reports of this sermon in order to set the record straight.<sup>5</sup> And, as if these changes are not enough, He reveals more to Joseph Smith about what He says on this solemn occasion to the Apostles.<sup>6</sup> In all, including what Jesus declares in Luke 17:20–3 and in other teachings about the fate of Jerusalem that Luke quotes,<sup>7</sup> we possess multiple records of Jesus's words about the end-time, an observation that underscores His weighty emphasis on the topic.

Further, these verses disclose Jesus's deep concern for the spiritually obtuse, a concern framed by His saying, "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:33). An earlier report of a similar saying, uttered when Jesus discusses discipleship, adds a significant phrase, recording Jesus's words thus: "Whosoever will lose his life *for my sake*, the same shall save it" (9:24; emphasis added). The broad context of the just-quoted words recorded by Luke in 17:33 stitch this added sense—"for my sake," although unspoken here—onto Jesus's intent, for He Himself stands at the center of His words and His Second Coming will make this coloration clear in dramatic fashion.

Both rampant speculation and spiritual malaise will characterize "the days of the Son of man," when Jesus "is revealed" (Luke 17:22, 26, 30). Jesus declares, first, to the speculating Pharisees that "the kingdom of God cometh not with observation" or with careful watching and calculating (17:20). Further, no one will know the time and place even though some may point out with assurance, "Lo here! or, lo there!" (17:21). Next, Jesus states clearly to the disciples that they are to avoid uninformed claims such as "See here; or, see there," completely steering away from claimants: "Go not after them, nor follow them," He intones (17:23). For Jesus shall come without warning, "as the lightning" (17:24).

On the other end of the spectrum, lounging apart from unbridled enthusiasts, will be the self-assuredly complacent—those who act like those of Noah’s day and are swept down by the flood (17:26–27); those who act like the inhabitants of Lot’s city and are burned (17:28–29); those who in sudden panic rush back into the house to retrieve valuables (17:31); those who because of temporal cares are not “taken” to meet the Son of Man but are left behind (17:33–36). For these, the drumbeat of Jesus’s words creates an unmistakable rhythm of warning.

The large-scale changes, all of which deal with the end-time, that the Joseph Smith Translation paints onto this section create a richly textured canvas of persons and events that are yet to come. And Jesus creates this painting for the instruction and edification of His disciples, who to this point in the Gospel are largely uninformed about these important matters that tie to the Savior’s still undisclosed ministry, a ministry that will continue beyond His death. In contrast to the additional materials that the Joseph Smith Translation affixes to a similar saying in Matthew’s Gospel about the gathering of eagles,<sup>8</sup> which consists of words drawn from elsewhere in Matthew’s report of Jesus’s sermon on the Mount of Olives, the added verses that appear in the Joseph Smith Translation of Luke’s record are entirely new, completely different from anything else in the Gospels.

The trigger mechanism for Jesus’s future ministry will be His death: “First he must suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 17:25). Thereafter, the picture is one of coming brightness, “as the light of the morning, that shineth . . . so shall also the Son of man be in his [coming] day” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 17:24). In that moment, “the disciple who shall be on the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 17:31). Rather, on this day of days, this disciple and other followers “shall be taken . . . whithersoever the saints are gathered; . . . the one from the bed, the other from the grinding, the other from the field” into “a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness . . . for the earth becoming old, . . . having waxed in corruption, wherefore it vanisheth away, and the footstool [the new earth] remaineth sanctified, cleansed from all sin” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 17:34, 37–40). Indeed, this first glimpse of eternity that Jesus offers to His disciples is arresting in its sweep and majestic in its promise.

## Notes

1 See the comments on Luke 4:1–13.

2 Luke 17:22, 26, 30, 33, 37.

3 Luke 19:41–44; 21:5–6, 20–28.

4 Luke 21:5–36; Matthew 24:1–25; Mark 13:1–37.

5 Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 21:5–36; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 24:1–25; Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 13:1–61.

- 6 Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 17:37–40; Doctrine and Covenants 45:16–59.
- 7 Luke 13:34–35; 19:41–44; 23:28–31.
- 8 Matthew 24:28; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 24:28–33; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:27–32.

## **Credits**

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