

Luke: 17:1–10

From Catena Aurea:

1. Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!

2. It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

THEOPHYLACT. Because the Pharisees were covetous and railed against Christ when He preached poverty, He put to them the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Afterwards, in speaking with His disciples concerning the Pharisees, He declares them to be men who caused division, and placed obstacles in the divine way. As it follows; Then said he unto his disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come, that is, hindrances to a good life and which is pleasing to God.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA. Now there are two kinds of offences, of which the one resist the glory of God, but the other serve only to cause a stumbling-block to the brethren. For the inventions of heresies, and every word that is spoken against the truth, are obstructions to the glory of God. Such offences however do not seem to be mentioned here, but rather those which occur between friends and brethren, as strifes, slanders, and the like. Therefore He adds afterwards, If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.

THEOPHYLACT. Or, He says that there must arise many obstacles to preaching and to the truth, as the Pharisees hindered the preaching of Christ. But some ask, If it needs be that offences should come, why does our Lord rebuke the author of the offences? for it follows, But woe to him through whom they come. For whatsoever necessity engenders is pardonable, or deserving of pardon. But observe, that necessity itself derives its birth from free-will. For our Lord, seeing how men cling to evil, and put forward nothing good, spoke with reference to the consequence of those things which are seen, that offences must needs come; just as if a physician, seeing a man using an unwholesome diet, should say, It is impossible but that such a one should be sick. And therefore to him that causes offences He denounces woe, and threatens punishment, saying, It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, &c.

CHRYSOSTOM. But by the punishment of the man who offends, learn the reward of him who saves. For had not the salvation of one soul been of such exceeding care to Christ, He would not threaten with such a punishment the offender.

17:3–4

3. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

4. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

AMBROSE. After the parable of the rich man who is tormented in punishment, Christ added a commandment to give forgiveness to those who turn themselves from their trespasses, lest any one through despair should not be reclaimed from his fault; and hence it is said, Take heed to yourselves.

THEOPHYLACT. As if He says, Offences must needs come; but it does not follow that you must perish, if only you be on your guard: as it need not that the sheep should perish when the wolf comes, if the shepherd is watching. And since there are great varieties of offenders, (for some are incurable, some are curable,) He therefore adds, If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.

AMBROSE. That there might neither be hard-wrung pardon, nor a too easy forgiveness, neither a harsh upbraiding, to dishearten, nor an overlooking of faults, to invite to sin; therefore it is said in another place, Tell him his fault between him and thee alone. (Mat. 18:15.) For better is a friendly correction, than a quarrelsome accusation. The one strikes shame into a man, the other moves his indignation. He who is admonished will more likely be saved, because he fears to be destroyed. For it is well that he who is corrected should believe you to be rather his friend than his enemy. For we more readily give ear to counsel than yield to injury. Fear is a weak preserver of consistency, but shame is an excellent master of duty. For he who fears is restrained, not amended. But He has well said, If he trespass against thee. For it is not the same thing to sin against God and to sin against man.

THEOPHYLACT. But some one may well ask, If when I have several times forgiven my brother he again trespass against me, what must I do with him? In answer therefore to this question He adds, And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; forgive him.

AMBROSE. Or this number is used because God rested on the seventh day from His works. After the seventh day of the world everlasting rest is promised us, that as the evil works of that world shall then cease, so also may the sharpness of punishment be abated.

17:5–6

5. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

6. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.

THEOPHYLACT. The disciples hearing our Lord discoursing of certain arduous duties, such as poverty, and avoiding offences, entreat Him to increase their faith, that so they might be able to follow poverty, (for nothing so prompts to a life of poverty as faith and hope in the Lord,) and through faith to guard against giving offences. Therefore it is said, And the Apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

AUGUSTINE. (de Quæst. Ev. lib. 2. qu. 39.) We may indeed understand that they asked for the increase of that faith by which men believe in the things which they see not; but there is further signified a faith in things, whereby not with the words only, but the things themselves present, we believe. And this shall be, when the Wisdom of God, by whom all things were made, shall reveal Himself openly to His saints face to face.

THEOPHYLACT. But our Lord told them that they asked well, and that they ought to believe stedfastly, forasmuch as faith could do many things; and hence it follows, And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, &c. Two mighty acts are here brought together in the same sentence; the transplanting of that which was rooted in the earth, and the planting thereof in the sea, (for what is ever planted in the waves?) by which two things He declares the power of faith.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 57. in Matt.) He mentions the mustard seed, because, though small in size, it is mightier in power than all the others. He implies then that the least part of faith can do great things. But though the Apostles did not transplant the mulberry tree, do not thou accuse them; for our Lord said not, You shall transplant, but, You shall be able to transplant. But they did not, because there was no need, seeing that they did greater things. (Hom. 32 in 1 ad Cor. c. 13:2.) But some one will ask, How does Christ say, that it is the least part of faith which can transplant a mulberry tree or a mountain, whereas Paul says that it is all faith which moves mountains? We must then answer, that the Apostle imputes the moving of

mountains to all faith, not as though only the whole of faith could do this, but because this seemed a great thing to carnal men on account of the vastness of the body.

AMBROSE. Or this is said because faith keeps out the unclean spirit, especially since the nature of the tree falls in with this meaning. For the fruit of the mulberry is at first white in the blossom, and being formed from thence grows red, and blackens as it gets ripe. The devil also having by transgression fallen from the white flower of the angelic nature and the bright beams of his power, grows terrible in the black odour of sin.

CHRYSOSTOM. The mulberry may be also compared to the devil, for as by the leaves of the mulberry tree certain worms are fed, so the devil, by the imaginations which proceed from him, is feeding for us a never dying worm; but this mulberry tree faith is able to pluck out of our souls, and plunge it into the deep.

17:7–10

7. But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

8. And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?

9. Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

10. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

THEOPHYLACT. Because faith makes its possessor a keeper of God's commandments, and adorns him with wonderful works; it would seem from thence that a man might thereby fall into the sin of pride. Our Lord therefore forewarned His Apostles by a fit example, not to boast themselves in their virtues, saying, But which of you having a servant plowing, &c.

AUGUSTINE. (de Quæst. Ev. l. 2. qu. 39.) Or else; To the many who understand not this faith in the truth already present, our Lord might seem not to have answered the petitions of His disciples. And there appears a difficulty in the connexion here, unless we suppose He meant the change from faith to faith, from that faith, namely, by which we serve God, to that whereby we enjoy Him. For then will our faith be increased when we first believe the word preached, next the reality present. But that joyful contemplation possesseth perfect peace, which is given unto us in the everlasting kingdom of God. And that perfect

peace is the reward of those righteous labours, which are performed in the administration of the Church. Be then the servant in the field ploughing, or feeding, that is, in this life either following his worldly business, or serving foolish men, as it were cattle, he must after his labours return home, that is, be united to the Church.

AMBROSE. For we know that no one sits down before he has first passed over. Moses indeed also passed over, that he might see a great sight. Since then thou not only sayest to thy servant, Sit down to meat, but requirest from him another service, so in this life the Lord does not put up with the performance of one work and labour, because as long as we live we ought always to work. Therefore it follows, And will not rather say, Make ready wherewith I may sup.

AUGUSTINE. (de Quæst. Ev. ubi sup.) While His servants also are ministering, that is, preaching the Gospel, our Lord is eating and drinking the faith and confession of the Gentiles. It follows, And afterward thou shall eat and drink. As if He says, After that I have been delighted with the work of thy preaching, and refreshed myself with the choice food of thy compunction, then at length shalt thou go, and feast thyself everlastingly with the eternal banquet of wisdom.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA. Our Lord teaches us that it is no more than the just and proper right of a master to require, as their bounden duty, subjection from servants, adding, Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. Here then is the disease of pride cut away. Why boastest thou thyself? Dost thou know that if thou payest not thy debt, danger is at hand, but if thou payest, thou doest nothing thankworthy? As St. Paul says, For though I preach the Gospel I have nothing to glory of, for necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel. (1 Cor. 9:16.)

Observe then that they who have rule among us, do not thank their subjects, when they perform their appointed service, but by kindness gaining the affections of their people, breed in them a greater eagerness to serve them. So likewise God requires from us that we should wait upon Him as His servants, but because He is merciful, and of great goodness, He promises reward to them that work, and the greatness of His loving-kindness far exceeds the labours of His servants.

AMBROSE. Boast not thyself then that thou hast been a good servant. Thou hast done what thou oughtest to have done. The sun obeys, the moon submits herself, the angels are subject; let us not then seek praise from ourselves. Therefore He adds in conclusion, So likewise ye, when ye have done all good things, say, We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which it was our duty to do.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

17:1–2 Those Who Create Stumbling Blocks

Woe to Those Who Place Temptations in the Path.

Cyril of Alexandria: The accompanying discussion that immediately follows these opening remarks and speaks of our pardoning our brothers and sisters in case they ever sin against us leads us to the idea that these were the offenses meant. What are these offenses? They are, I suppose, mean and annoying actions, fits of anger whether on good grounds or without justification, insults, slander, and other stumbling blocks similar to these. He says that these temptations must come. Is this then because God, who governs all, forces people to their commission of sin? Away with the thought! Nothing that is evil comes from him. He is the fountain of all virtue. Why then must this happen? They clearly happen because of our infirmity, for all of us stumble in many things, as it is written. Nevertheless he says that there will be woe to the person who lays the stumbling blocks in the way. He does not leave indifference in these things without rebuke but restrains it by fear of punishment. He still commands us to bear with patience those who cause sins to happen. Commentary on Luke, Homilies 113–16.

The Scandal Here is the Passion of Christ.

Peter Chrysologus: Hear the Lord saying, “Woe to the world because of scandals!” A scandal tempts the saints, fatigues the cautious, throws down the incautious, disturbs all things and confuses all people. It is true that in this present passage the Lord is talking about the scandal of his passion. Sermon 27.

Temptations are Sins to Come.

Jerome: “It is impossible,” he says, “that scandals should not come.” I suppose that a scandal is a sin because sin comes through scandal. “In many things we all offend.” Granted that I have not come to ruin, but I have certainly offended not only in one thing but also in many things. Against the Pelagians 2.15.

17:3–4 Forgive Those Who Repent

Jesus Follows the Parable with Words of Mercy.

Ambrose: “If your brother sins against you, reprove him.” After the parable of the rich man who was tortured in punishment, how fittingly he added the command of showing mercy to those indeed who repent of their error, for fear that despair might not recall someone from guilt! He is truly moderate, so that pardon is not difficult or leniency lax, fearing that harsh reproof might cast someone down or conspiracy might invite guilt!... He fittingly said, “If your brother sins against you,” for it is not an equal condition to sin against people and against God. The apostle, who is a true interpreter of the divine prophecy, says, “After the first admonition, avoid a person that is a heretic,” because unbelief is not on a par with minor transgression. Since error very often surprises someone through ignorance, he commands that it should be rebuked, so that stubbornness is shunned and a mistake is corrected. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 8.21–22.

To Forgive Seven Times.

Cyril of Alexandria: He says, “If he who sins against you repents and acknowledges his fault, you shall forgive him not only once, but very many times.” We ... must rather imitate those whose business it is to heal our bodily diseases and who do not care for a sick person once only or twice, but just as often as he happens to become ill. Let us remember that we also are liable to infirmities and overpowered by our passions. This being the case, we pray that those who have the duty to rebuke us and who have the authority to punish us may show themselves forgiving and kind to us. It is our duty, having a common feeling for our mutual infirmities, to bear one another’s burdens, so we will fulfill the law of Christ. Observe also that in the Gospel according to Matthew, Peter makes the inquiry, “How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” The Lord then tells the apostles, “Although he sins seven times in the day,” that is, frequently, “and will acknowledge his fault, you shall forgive him.” Commentary on Luke, Homilies 113–16.

17:5–6 Doing Great Things by Faith

To Increase Faith is to Strengthen It by the Holy Spirit.

Cyril of Alexandria: They ask, “Add faith to us.” They do not ask simply for faith, for perhaps you might imagine them to be without faith. They rather ask Christ for an addition to their faith and to be strengthened in faith. Faith partly depends on us and partly is the gift of the divine grace. The beginning of faith depends on us and our maintaining confidence and faith in God with all our power. The confirmation and strength necessary for this comes from the divine grace. For that reason, since all things are possible with God, the Lord says that all things are possible for him who believes. The power that comes to us through faith is of God. Knowing this, blessed Paul also says in the first epistle to the Corinthians, “For to one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, and to another faith in the same Spirit.” You see that he has placed faith also in the catalogue of spiritual graces. The disciples requested that they might receive this from the Savior, contributing also what was of themselves. By the descent upon them of the Holy Spirit, he granted it to them after the fulfillment of the dispensation. Before the resurrection, their faith was so feeble that they were liable even to the charge of being “little of faith.” Commentary on Luke, Homilies 113–16.

The Great Faith of the Church.

Augustine: A mustard seed looks small. Nothing is less noteworthy to the sight, but nothing is stronger to the taste. What does that signify but the very great fervor and inner strength of faith in the church? Sermon 246.3.

17:7–10 An Apostle is a Humble Slave

The Faithful are Called to Humble Service.

Ambrose: You do not say to your servant, “Sit down,” but require more service from him and do not thank him. The Lord also does not allow only one work or labor for you, because so long as we live we must always work.

Know that you are a servant overwhelmed by very much obedience. You must not set yourself first, because you are called a son of God. Grace must be acknowledged, but nature not overlooked. Do not

boast of yourself if you have served well, as you should have done. The sun obeys, the moon complies, and the angels serve.... Let us not require praise from ourselves nor prevent the judgment of God and anticipate the sentence of the Judge but reserve it for its own time and Judge. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 8.31–32.

Pursuit of Human Glory.

Chrysostom: He said, “When you have done everything, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants,’ ” to warn them in his wish that they keep themselves at great distance from that destructive passion. Dearly beloved, see how the person with his mouth open for human glory and performing the works of virtue on that account has no benefit from it. Despite practicing every example of virtue, if he seems to give himself credit for it, he ends up empty-handed and bereaved of everything. Homily on Genesis 31.4.