

Is Jesus Asking the Impossible?

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor here. It's great if you've joined us from home or wherever you might be watching the live stream or for those of us here in the building, if you could keep that Bible passage open, either on the sheets or in a Bible, if you've got it, or at home, you can look at it online on biblegateway.com, and that would be a great help to me because the most important thing is that we're engaging with God's Word whatever I say.

We've been sitting down for a little while, haven't we? So I just wondered, I think it was kind of in the first century in Jesus' time to pray. You stood up and you put your hands in the air.

So you don't have to do that, but if you'd like to stand when I pray, it might just sort of help us with our face coverings on and in the building, and you can do whatever you like at home.

No one's watching. So let's ask for God's help as we turn to his Word. Let's pray. Mighty and gracious Heavenly Father, we praise you that you sent Jesus and that in his coming, your kingdom came into our midst.

We pray that you would help us to see Jesus clearly this morning, that you'd help us to know in him your love for us and your will for our lives.

[1 : 20] And we ask that your Holy Spirit will work powerfully in us, that you will make our hearts open to the correction of your Word and the comforts of your Word.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, do grab a seat. One of the books I read this, I did read this summer, the book that Robbie just recommended, Gentle and Lordly.

It's a great book. Another book that I read earlier this year was The Madness of Crowds, if you've come across that, by Douglas Murray, which is written, and Douglas Murray is not a Christian. He's writing about our culture and his concerns for our culture.

And one of the things he says is that in our culture, we seem to have lost the ability to forgive. We don't have a good system and model and understanding of how we forgive somebody.

So we're seeing a lot of judgmentalism around us, aren't we? Some of it about people in history. So this week, it was David Hume, the 18th century Scottish thinker, who was in trouble in Edinburgh.

[2 : 20] They have renamed David Hume Tower 40 George Square because David Hume wrote some things that suggest he was racist. He had racist views.

And so a decision's been taken to rename that tower. And we don't know who could be next.

Whatever the rights and wrongs are of that with David Hume, it's been pointed out that Robbie Burns actually took a job as the overseer of a slave plantation in Jamaica.

So, you know, what do we make of that? How do we judge people from the past by the moral values of today? And the problem for us who are still alive today is that nobody forgets anymore.

Because if you've expressed a view about anything, an opinion, if you've done something wrong, if you've said something wrong, with the internet, things are getting recorded and kept forever.

So politicians are finding that comments they might have made 20 or 30 years ago get retweeted by somebody who finds them. And it's incredibly damaging for their political career, even if they now think quite differently or would say, well, I did something wrong.

[3 : 32] The actress Kate Winslet was this week saying she's trying to distance herself from some comments she made a few years ago where she defended working with the director, Woody Allen.

And she said when she was being asked about it, can people accept that I made a mistake? It's an interesting question for our times. So we're clearly in a very moralistic culture with very strong views about right and wrong.

And if people cross the line, we're quick to condemn and slow to forgive. Well, Jesus' first followers were surrounded by a culture a bit like that.

Very moralistic, strong views about right and wrong, often good views about what's right and what's wrong, and yet very judgmental with it, condemnatory of people who crossed the lines. And that system was led by the Pharisees. They were the Jewish leaders at the time. So in that religious, moralistic framework in Jesus' environment, those were the people who set the agenda. [4 : 37] And Jesus is creating God's new community around him. It's a community where he announces that anybody is welcome.

Whatever you've done, whoever you've become, Luke chapter 15, two chapters before this section, Jesus is very clear that you're welcome to join God's kingdom.

You just have to repent. Repentance is required, which is admitting that we've been living in rebellion against God and turning in our hearts back to God, seeking his forgiveness.

And if we do that, we'll be forgiven. And his new community is completely upside down from the world's point of view. So Jesus, this morning, gives some of the marks of true disciples of his community.

We might call them his values for his community. And the first value or command is don't cause offense. So have a look with me again at verse one. Jesus said to his disciples, things that cause people to stumble are bound to come.

[5 : 42] Now that stumbling is about people drifting away from being a Christian, either committing significant sin in their lives or just giving up on being a Christian, kind of stumbling on the way of following Jesus.

things that cause us to do that, the temptations are bound to come. But then he says, but war to anyone through whom they come. And then Jesus plays a game of would you rather.

I don't know if you've ever played that game. Sometimes you play it on teenage youth holidays or our kids have picked it up from school where you ask a friend a question and there's either two good options or two bad options and you're saying would you rather of the two options.

So, you know, with teenagers you might say would you rather smell of fish for the rest of your life or you can only smell fish everywhere you go for the rest of your life.

Which would you rather have happen to you? Or would you rather have hair all around the inside of your mouth or hair all over your face?

[7 : 00] It's that kind of kind of game. And Jesus plays that kind of game here except it's not a close contest and it's very shocking because he says compared with God's attitude towards you if you cause another disciple to stumble so the consequences for you of that verse 2 it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round your neck.

It's a very powerful image isn't it? You see millstones around Scotland today I don't know if you've seen them sometimes you see them in villages if you see them in Scotland they're usually medieval but they would be similar size to what they would have had in Jesus' time in the Middle East that you have these huge stones about that kind of that diameter and they use them to roll to crunch out the grain to tread the grain to grind it that's the word I was looking for grind and Jesus is saying here picture somebody on the edge of a pier maybe looking down over the deep sea and a millstone being next to them on the pier with a chain tied to the millstone and being tied round their neck and then the millstone being rolled off the edge of the pier and maybe you imagine a little bit of time as the chain is getting tighter and then suddenly they're thrown off the edge of the pier and they just plunge into the sea it's a really strong image verse 2 it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble these little ones are just other disciples perhaps particularly having in mind newer Christians people who are younger in their faith not necessarily younger in age but younger in faith so the world says I've got the right to live my life the way I want to live it and if other people take offence get over it that's their problem but the disciple of Jesus says even if I'm doing nothing wrong what effect is my life having on other people around me what effect am I having could I could I cause another Christian to be disheartened and become an obstacle to them growing as a Christian by something I do or say so clearly it could be from committing sin ourselves and a younger Christian sees our bad behaviour and they're so kind of disheartened by the inconsistency that it just discourages them and they think well you know what I thought there was more to it than that but then I saw this Christian doing that and just saw hypocrisy you sometimes meet people who say well I'm a Christian but I don't go to church and I mean

I have issues with that but often when you talk to someone like that you find that something happened at their church that was wrong somebody spoke to them harshly or mistreated them or

they the church they were in there was a scandal their home group leader or someone in the leadership did something that was scandalous it might not be as obvious as that that we cause people to stumble it could be that someone starts coming along to church and they just feel as though the friendship groups are impenetrable that they just can't make friends because people seem to have there's like an inner ring of people who know each other and they do their holidays together and then people feel uninvited or they socialize together and people feel that they were never asked to go and so it leaves people feeling alienated and not wanted let me just say that I do think that at St Silas we do have in our church family some people who are really good at welcoming people and it's a wonderful thing when you see that it's inspiring that in normal time and obviously at the moment it's pretty difficult face coverings and no socializing in church and rule of six but in normal time

I've been so encouraged by the way that you see there's people at St Silas who will deliberately forego the conversations they might want to have on a Sunday with people that they already know well and want to catch up with because they see somebody they don't know or they see somebody who's clearly on their own you know browsing the bookstall or looking at the notices on their own and they go out of their way to move across to speak to them to welcome them to spend time with them the people who have space in their diary for newcomers at church or for people who they know are struggling even if they're not like them at all the people who have something in the slow cooker before they come to church and they're not sure yet who they're going to invite over but they know there'll be some people to sweep up and invite back to their home for lunch it's really inspiring to see that going on and it's easy to lose that it's tempting to settle for coming to church just to see a few close friends and spending your time with them to catch up with them justifying it on the basis of how busy we are and just not being available and welcoming to people who are either very new or just very different to us and it can cause people to stumble another way we might cause people to stumble is just in how we use our conversations and it's worth thinking especially about the sort of [12:45] Bible study context if you're in a fellowship group in a growth group or you're in a roots group about just the danger of answering questions not to actually encourage and help the people in your group but actually just to try and show how clever you are to say well I'm the person who knows this and leaving other people in the group thinking I don't belong here because I found it a bit overwhelming I didn't really know the answers and I felt a bit out of it or even being in that kind of context and asking asking the kind of provocative almost facetious questions not thinking about the effect that might have on other people and Jesus calls us instead to be thinking all the time about other Christians and how to encourage them so that's the first challenge and if we just heard that challenge I guess we might end up thinking when somebody does that to us when someone causes offense that we're justified in resenting them and even resenting the church but then Jesus immediately follows it with this second value that I think is enormously challenging it's don't stay offended clearly if Jesus is building

God's new community out of flawed material us sinful human beings welcomed back to God spending time in that community people are going to offend you by their behavior by their lives by what they say because we're flawed so let's pick things up at verse 3 so watch yourselves if your brother or sister sins against you rebuke them and if they repent forgive them and then how many times 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 well if that literally happened to you seven times in the same day you would start to wonder if the person was actually sorry wouldn't you but even then he's saying you must forgive them and the danger is on us that verse 3 so watch yourselves the most dangerous time for us in our daily battle to live for God and not to fall into sin is when we're sinned against because it's when we most feel justified in acting selfishly isn't it we think our anger is justified our slander our getting someone and making them pay so we have to watch ourselves if you just think about how we naturally react to being offended by somebody else's sin usually for my money we don't approach them about it we find culturally we find that kind of conversation extraordinarily difficult to say to somebody what you have done has hurt me and it's made me angry we find that very difficult so what we do instead is we tell somebody else about it because then we get sympathy but we actually harm that person because we harm their reputation before others and then rather than seeking to have a reconciliation what we tend to do is relive what the person has done to us again and again in our hearts and so we hurt ourselves with that ongoing resentment it's never dealt with so verse 3 says if your brother or sister sins against you rebuke them so go and

see them speak to them and if they repent forgive them so you go to see them open ready to forgive them in your heart for what they've done and you're rebuking them out of a concern for their good for God has put us in each other's lives church as people to be instruments in his project in each of our lives to make us the people he redeemed us to be to make us more like Christ and we can find sometimes that the sin that has hurt us in someone else is a blind spot for them and we go and see them to point it out graciously so that God can use that with them heard right if they're willing to listen to bring about in them a repentance a dependence on God to change and if they repent you forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive and when we don't forgive we get twisted up inside before you know it you start hoping that that person that bad things happen to them you know they something goes wrong for them and you're happy about it it's a horrible place to be in your heart when you're pleased that something bad has happened to somebody else because of how they treated you so what gets in the way of forgiveness for us well one problem is how we view the other person when someone does wrong to us what we often do is we take that thing they've done as exemplifying who they are as a person but we wouldn't do that to ourselves so if you think about if somebody lied if somebody told you something and you found out later it was a lie we tend to think about them that person is a liar I will never trust anything they say again whereas if we tell a lie and we're confronted about it what do we say well it was complicated yeah I shouldn't really have said that but you know it was quite a difficult situation it was really damaging if I told the truth so this is something Miroslav Volff said he said a Christian writer he said forgiveness flounders when I exclude the enemy from the community of humans at the same time as I exclude myself from the community of sinners see what he's saying so the person who has wronged me I'm not being gracious with them because I'm not treating them as another human made in the image of God and I'm not identifying with their flaws because I'm not willing to put myself in the community of sinners which of course I am in that community I'm much worse than that person realises so once we've accepted that common ground with the person who's wronged us what does it take to forgive them it means that in our hearts we surrender the right to make them pay for what they've done and we ourselves pay the debt instead there's been harm there's been something that's caused damage damage to us and forgiveness is about saying I'll pay that debt

I will wish good for that person instead of insisting that they pay for what they've done and maybe today's passage for it to be effective for Jesus words to be effective for us today maybe we have to take some time today or this week individually prayerfully before God to think to ourselves is there someone who has wronged me and I've not forgiven them and I'm reliving it I'm replaying it in my heart is there someone I need to go and see and have this kind of conversation with ready to listen to them but brave enough to say to them what you did has harmed me and I want to offer you forgiveness so that's our attitude to one another what should our attitude be towards Jesus that's our third value it's do your duty third point this morning do your duty and Jesus tells the parable of the farmer as a picture for us of what it looks like to be one of his disciples and just notice as we look at that that Jesus is speaking about what was culturally normal at his time around him he knows that his hearers would have agreed with him about this is how you'd rightly treat a servant in verse seven suppose one of you has a servant plowing 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 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 will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do now

[21 : 34] I think we find that a bit hard don't we because of course in our culture we hopefully would say thank you to the person even if they were a servant in our house I think I say thank you a lot and my wife Kathy even embarrasses me because we go out for dinner before and we'll order drinks and someone will bring the drinks the waiter will bring a drink and Kathy will say oh thank you that's really kind of you and I think it wasn't that kind I mean I asked for the drink and it'll be on the bill you know I mean just thank you is fine but anyway it's good isn't it that we're a culture where we say thank you but what Jesus is describing here is from a culture where a servant has fallen into someone's fallen into debt there's no welfare state they need a way out and so somebody takes them in as a servant and they're duty bound to do what's asked and so I guess an equivalent of that story for us would be if you you'd actually hired somebody you were wealthy enough to hire somebody to be your gardener and chef and they came around one afternoon and they did the garden and when they came in you said oh don't worry about the dinner actually

I'll just make the dinner and you sit down and I'll cook for you well you wouldn't do that because you've hired them to be the gardener chef so you'd expect them to cook as well as do the gardening that's kind of obvious that's just their duty and then Jesus in verse 10 turns the tables on us and how we think about God so verse 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 it's very provocative isn't it that the Christian is a servant of God a slave of God really the Christian life has more to it than being a servant of God we could say more about it about being a child of God and the blessings of it but it's not less than that it's not less than being a servant of God and doing our duty when everything we have is a gift from him our lives our senses our shelters our food our resources our relationships everything is from him and then he bought us and redeemed us at great cost so whatever we do for Jesus now we're never doing more than doing our duty in our culture of entitlement we might be tempted to think look I've done all this for God so I'd expect my life to work in a certain way in return or I've served God in this way he must be pretty glad to have me on his team but the parable says that we say to God I'm just doing my duty we can't think to ourselves well I helped out at the youth group last night so I can do what I like today no today we ask well yesterday I did my duty what's my duty today before God so after those three values don't cause offense don't stay offended do your duty you can see where the question comes from in verse 5 that the apostles say to Jesus Lord increase our faith in other words this is impossible how are we going to do this if only we had more faith maybe we'd stand a chance so that's our fourth point know your limits is Jesus asking the impossible is having more faith the answer well look at verse 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 it's another vivid pretty bizarre picture isn't it the mulberry trees were known for having very complex root systems you know there was more to them underground than there was above the ground and so the idea that you could get a spade out and just uproot a mulberry tree was absurd

Jesus says you could uproot a mulberry tree and then replant it in the sea it's impossible and Jesus is saying with God all things are possible and when Jesus calls us to change when he calls us to line up our lives behind his work of making disciples and growing disciples in the world we can attempt great things for God and we can expect great things from God if we depend prayerfully on him for that change inside us why does he choose a mulberry tree it could just be that it's a picture of the impossible that there was one there for him to use as a prop it might be because the complex deep rooted nature of the tree is in some way a helpful kind of picture of how resentment is rooted in our hearts and the idea of being able to forgive sounds impossible but Jesus is saying with God it is possible that you could find the strength to change and it doesn't matter how uneasy our faith is how much of a struggle we find it to be a Christian because the mustard seed faith as small as a mustard seed it was absolutely minuscule you balance it on your fingertip the point is what our faith is in it's in the God who can do all things the God who raised

Jesus from the dead in Ephesians 1 there's this prayer of Paul where he prays that we would grasp that the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us to reshape and soften our hearts that great battle of changing us and how does his spirit do that well miraculously by helping us to grasp more deeply the gospel of Jesus Christ if we just look at the challenges of this passage of Luke 17 what would make us more careful not to cause another disciple to stumble to realign our not to stand on our right to realign our lives around not causing others to stumble people well how about seeing in the gospel this is a person for whom Jesus died that Jesus knew this person before the foundation of the world and chose to come into the world to die for their sin

[28 : 18] I need to care for them what would make us willing to forgive our brother or sister who repent seven times in the same day well how about grasping that we're sinning every minute of every day in ways we're not even aware of and ways that we even are aware of and God sees all of that and he forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives every day my debt he paid my death he died that I might live and what enables us to live our lives in obedient duty towards God as humble servants well when you think about the alternative that Jesus describes of the servant coming in from plowing the field and sitting back and saying to the master great yeah you prepare the meal now I'll just sit back and enjoy it before you eat the problem with that picture is that's a picture of a servant pretending they're the king and that's our problem in our lives naturally in our hearts that we were made by God the king to serve him but we each make ourselves into the king what can turn it around it's grasping that we have a king who became a servant that Jesus is the king and he is the king who stepped into the world to value others above

himself obedient to death on a cross so blessings be on him our servant king and we are unworthy servants indeed let's pray together

Lord Jesus we thank you for your wonderful love for us that you came to welcome the unworthy the weak the vile the poor into your kingdom that you were glad to welcome us may our grasp of your forgiveness and care for us deepen so that by your spirit you transform us to be a people who nurture the faith of others who forgive and forgive and forgive and who remain your dutiful servants for the glory of your name we ask amen