

Make a Lasting Impact 4) Impact of a Life of Faith

Luke 17:1-10 • October 27, 2019 • Sermon Series on Luke 15-17



Sometimes people don't think about the lasting impact their actions will make. That was the case in 1935 when a sugar cane company in Australia thought they had a clever solution for dealing with beetles damaging their crops. At least, it seemed pretty clever at the time. In order to control the beetles they brought in a type of beetle eating toad native to Central and South America. This toad, however, soon became a classic case study for what we mean when we call something an invasive species. The cane toad has a poison which it secretes to defend itself from predators. When it was first introduced into northeastern Australia it quickly took hold. With no natural predators to keep it in check and a poison to stop all who dared, it spread rapidly. It made its way over the decades across the vastness of Australia's northern coastal regions. Today some of begun to spot it in Western Australia. And the toads outnumber people 60 to 1. They are not welcome guests. Natural wildlife, pet dogs, and even people can die if they ingest their poison. And they are predicted to only keep on spreading over the continent. All because of one single shipment of toads a whole continent has suffered for decades. We've been going through a series in Luke 15-17 looking at the lasting impact that we make by what we do with our life right now. Today we consider how the impact we make can be for good or for bad. That means we need to take our life of faith very seriously. What we do today will have a lasting effect on tomorrow -for good or for bad.

Like the devastation from an invasive species, our sin can cause great damage. Jesus notes that the spread of damaging sin is unavoidable. "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come." The word here for "things that cause people to stumble" refers to something which causes somebody harm. It could cause them harm because it either leads them to sin, harms their faith, or causes them to fall away from faith. We live in a sin-filled world and a sin-cursed world. You can't avoid encountering things that cause people to stumble any more than the people of Australia can avoid the spread of unwelcome toads. Such things are bound to come.

Sins that cause people to stumble may be impossible to avoid. But that doesn't mean that we should in any way begin to get comfortable with them. Jesus warns us to watch ourselves. If someone does something which causes another to stumble Jesus says it is a horrible thing. He warns, "Things that cause to stumble are people impossible to avoid, but woe to anyone through whom they come. 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 to stumble." Little ones could include both children and those who are new to the faith. There are lots of things in this world which cause little ones to stumble. A little child will see a video online or a movie and decided that what they see is good to follow. They might be led to all sorts of sin and all sorts of things will attack their faith. Someone who is new to the faith will have godless coworkers or family which will cause them to doubt their faith or fall away from faith in Jesus. There are countless things, in cinema, music, social media which will lead children into sin. There are so many things that will try to persuade youth to turn away from Christ.

But you and I have to take note that Jesus isn't speaking to the unbelieving world here. He isn't focused on bashing the music industry, the film industry, public television programs that teach evolution, public universities that have professors who mock Christians, or unbelieving peers who pressure the young into sexual immorality and godlessness. He is talking to his disciples. "Watch yourselves!" he tells us. Whether we are aware of it or not we can cause great harm!

Do we always recognize when we might be causing lasting harm? Is there anything we might not be watching carefully which could cause someone to stumble into sin or stumble in faith? It may seem like a small thing when you tolerate the music which dishonors God's gift of marriage. But who is to blame if that godless song is heard in your home? Who is to blame if your own children or grandchildren are influenced by it? Who is to blame if your new in the faith Christian neighbor stumbles over it? It may seem like a small thing for parents to give their children a phone or tablet. But that electronic device is a portal to the most deceptive and darkest places on the internet. It opens the door to everything from feeding materialistic selfishness to pornography. Who is responsible if a parent puts this into their child's hands without equipping them to face those dangers? Who is responsible when a small child stumbles in the dark while staring at a glowing screen given to them by their own parents? It may not seem like a big deal when you skip out on worship and treat it like an optional thing on occasion. But what will the next generation think of the habit of worship when their parents occasionally find sleeping in, hunting, golfing, or sports more important than honoring the Lord? What example do you leave for others? It may not seem like a big deal when you have an argument and make a big scene without resolving it. But who notices this habit and looks up to you? Does anything that you do ever cause someone else whether little or new to the faith to stumble in their faith? A disciple ought to discipline, not harm the faith of others. "Woe to you," Jesus says, if you are the one through whom stumbling comes. "Watch yourself." He warns.

Bad things happen when carelessness reigns. I'm sure that the ships which first carried tiny shelled creatures called zebra mussels from the Caspian Sea to different parts of the world didn't even understand what they were doing or how it would impact others. But those tiny mussels held onto the ships, or hung in their ballast water until they were released into a new lake across the world. The tiny zebra mussel has caused more damage than those who carried it might have ever guessed. It has spread across the largest freshwater lakes and devastated natural wildlife populations. This all

because those who transported it weren't taking care to avoid spreading the damage. So it often is with sins that cause little ones to stumble. Parents, grandparents who interact with little ones in the faith and Christians who interact with new Christians don't always realize they are wreaking havoc on the faith of others. And the damage is far greater than they might even realize. What you do today that causes stumbling in faith has lasting and eternal ramifications for others!

Jesus says it is so serious that it would be better to have a large stone hung around your neck and to be tossed into the sea than to cause a little one to stumble. He is in effect saying it would be better if you vanished without a trace than remained to do harm that would leave a lasting mark on someone's faith life. Watch our faith life closely including the observance of God's law! The impact is severe if you don't so the sin is one to take most seriously!

But Jesus wants our faith life to be more than just careful observance of the law of God. He knows that damaging sins will come. He understands that we will fail and those we love will experience the pain and guilt of sin. So, right next to his warning to watch yourself so that you don't lead others to stumble in faith he includes instruction to watch yourself that you handle sin as you ought. "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them." This is the proper use of God's law. Notice he isn't asking us to go around pointing out the sin and rebuking the unbelieving world. He is asking us to rebuke fellow Christians. If you see someone who is causing someone to stumble in faith you need to rebuke them. Don't just watch them cause harm and damage to themselves and others. Say something. Point out their wrong.

Yet, do it with the goal of displaying forgiveness. God wants us to take his law seriously, yes. But we need to give the gospel its full weight and worth too! "...And if they repent, forgive them. 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." Seriousness about sin must be coupled with seriousness about the gospel. The goal in rebuking others when they sin is not to get them to tie a millstone around their neck so they might vanish in despair. The goal is to forgive. To forgive means that you let the sin go and no longer hold it against them. To forgive means that you will not put that particular sin down on a list and stick it in your pocket so that you can pull it out later. Those who say they forgive but then keep bringing up a sin do not understand what it means to forgive. Jesus is speaking about a full and free release from sin's guilt and pain. The person who repents is to be freely pardoned without cost or shame. Forgiveness also knows no limit. Even if the person seems to exhaust your patience and comes to you again and again in the same day seeking pardon, forgive. A life which treats God's law seriously will avoid causing serious damage with that great care. But a life which treats God's gospel seriously will heal an enormous degree of damage with their rebuking the sinner and their forgiveness for the repentant.

When the disciples heard these things, they seemed to have an overwhelming sense of the inadequacy of their faith. "Lord, increase our faith!" they said. You and I also might recognize the times we've failed to watch our life closely. How can you and I claim to be living a life of faith when we have at times caused someone to stumble in their faith? Has your Christian life been so free from sin that you've been the perfect example for others? Or have you at times tolerated sin to the point that it caused others to sin? And how has your life of faith been in the area of rebuking those who do sin? Do you follow Jesus' advice and rebuke a brother or sister in the faith when they sin, or do you just try to avoid all conflict and let the damage continue? Then when someone seeks forgiveness, do you dish it out perfectly? Or are you sometimes only able to remind people of how they are trying your patience and don't really deserve your forgiveness?

Faith in Jesus leads to the impossible happening. Even faith as small as a mustard seed, practically unseen to the observer, is powerful to bring about the impossible. That is because our faith is in the only one who could do what we needed. Jesus was never unaware of the damage caused by sin. From the beginning he knew it would spread over all the world to destroy and kill. But he dealt with it for us. He came to rescue us from the plague of poison. It wasn't a poison from some toad, but from our own hearts. But never once did the man Jesus cause anyone to sin. Never once did he do something you could blame for harming the faith of another. Never once did he fail to rebuke the brother or sister in the faith who needed a rebuke. He took God's law seriously. Most seriously. And with that perfect and blameless life the Son of God gave his life. On the cross he took our place and the poison and damage of all our sin. But sin's curse could not hold him in the grave. He rose again to announce our freedom and forgiveness. We are forgiven -even several times over each day and hour. That's because Jesus took God's law and gospel most seriously!

How we now live has a lasting impact. It can be for good, or for bad. That's why we are called to watch ourselves and take both God's law and gospel seriously. And when we do, we should not take pride in ourselves. We are merely God's servants. When we watch ourselves and avoid sin or share forgiveness, we aren't doing anything spectacular. We are merely doing what God wants. We are servants only doing our duty for our Lord. We are nothing more. He is everything!

Jesus has done the most spectacular thing. He didn't stop the spread of invasive species. He stopped the spread of sin and death. He has done what no one ever could. It wasn't his duty, but he graciously made it his goal to free us from sin's harm. The impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has echoed throughout the world and will continue to echo through your life and mine. And it will resound into eternity for those who follow him in faith. With him, we make a lasting impact!