

*Jesus!*  
*“Expressing the Ethics of Jesus”*  
*Or, “Following Jesus Is a Way, not Just an Event”*  
*(Luke 17:1-19)*

*Take a first look.*

I. I once read a theologian’s indictment of an exaggerated view of the doctrine of eternal security. He described a tendency of Southern Christian practice, where the Baptist-Christian emphasis of “Once-saved-always-saved” has been pervasive. This theologian is himself from the Southern section of the United States, also, so he was speaking from his own observations. He told a story about Elvis Presley. He said that Elvis could sing gospel songs at the piano downstairs at Graceland, with tears in his eyes, and then when he was finished, he could then go upstairs with the pianist and fornicate with her. I suppose he was telling the truth about this enigmatic rock-and-roll singer.

I heard recently that yet another headline Christian leader has fallen from international esteem. Apparently, this man had been engaged in a secret life of sexual infidelity while maintaining a major platform of international influence as a defender of the Christian faith. He died this past year. The ministry that bears his name reported that the well-respected investigative team the ministry hired to examine the allegations found a lot of evidence to confirm them. What a terrible revelation for his family and for his ministry partners! What a terrible revelation to all of us who have read his books and profited from his teaching!

II. This should never be true about those who follow Jesus Christ! That God we have not put our faith in some human spokesman for the Lord, but we have put our trust in our Lord Himself. Now, not only are we drawn to Jesus Christ to believe certain truths, we are also compelled by His Spirit to *put them into practice* in our lives. ***The theology of Jesus and the ethics of Jesus are inseparable.*** Jesus makes this clear in some of His collected teachings found in Luke 17. If we truly believe in Jesus, we must learn to express the ethics of Jesus, as well.

*Take a closer look at Luke 17:1-10.*

**Insights:**

**I. WE EXPRESS THE ETHICS OF JESUS WHEN WE GUARD OUR INFLUENCE ON OTHERS.  
17:1-4**

1. *Jesus warned His disciples against setting a bad example for others.* The NIV translates, “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come.” Literally, Jesus said, “It is impossible for stumbling blocks not to keep coming.” Jesus teaches us to expect that occasions for stumbling are going to be many and varied and always before us.

But the warning given is this: *don’t be a stumbling block yourself!* The warning is very sobering. Better to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied to your neck than to “cause one of these little ones to sin.” Who are the “little ones” mentioned here? Could Jesus have gestured to the children who were visible around them? Could He have been referring to the disciples who were young in the faith? Could He have simply been referring to all His followers, who have come to follow Him with childlike faith?

Insight: The thrust of the passage is clear, whichever way you take the phrase: we must guard our example and influence on others from becoming something that they trip over while trying to follow Jesus.

**I—Our moral orientation always has an effect on others, whether we intend it to or not.**

The late Chuck Colson presented thoughtful comment in his daily *BreakPoint* commentary, heard on the radio all over America, up until his death in 2012. I now receive thoughtful email messages from John Stonestreet, the current director of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview. In one installment of *BreakPoint Commentary*, Colson reflected on the Enron scandal that became part of our national conversation since the first month of January, 2002. It became more and more obvious that something sinister had been taking place in this mega-business before it filed the largest bankruptcy in American history. Colson identified why it is that moral categories are so blurry in the minds of American people. One of the lessons learned from the story of the Enron Corporation is that “human nature hasn’t changed.” The love of money is still a root of all kinds of evil. People will mislead and use anyone, ultimately, to get more money, if that has become their single goal.

“The other lesson,” said Colson, “involves the distinction between right and wrong in an age that has ceased believing in moral absolutes. If you go to the nation’s top business schools, you’ll note very little is said about morality or honor.” Colson reports, “I discovered this when ... I lectured on ethics at the Harvard Business School. The school, at the time, offered a course on ethics that I found to be pure pragmatism: Don’t do the wrong thing because it’s bad for business. I found the students hadn’t a clue about real ethics.”<sup>1</sup>

**I—And about the same time, the *USA Today* seemed to confirm this: “A survey of 7,000 resumes reveals many job seekers misrepresent themselves.** Of the resumes with misleading information, here are the top offenses and the percentage of time they are misrepresented:

“False number of years in a job: 71 percent, Accomplishments exaggerated: 64 percent, Size of organization managed exaggerated: 60 percent, Partial degree indicated as full degree: 52 percent, Compensation exaggerated: 48 percent.”<sup>2</sup> I wonder if this has changed much in the past two decades?

*The Way of Jesus not only challenges our motivation to selfishness, but it compels us to ask how our own choices and actions will affect those around us and those in the generations to come who will inherit our moral framework.*

2. *Jesus urged His disciples to take responsibility for each other.* Not only were the disciples told, “watch yourselves,” but He also told them, in effect, to watch each other, to consider the moral actions of other Christians toward them and to stand ready to help them in their growth by taking decisive action. That action was to take this specific form (#3):

3. *Jesus urged His disciples to stand ready to forgive.* Forgiveness is morally and spiritually powerful. It is the unexpected visitation of grace in a context that expects a cry for justice. When people are expecting retaliation and hatred, and they receive mercy and grace instead, the kingdom of God has come.

Insight: We must assume a moral responsibility for each other in the body of Christ. This includes giving our brothers and sisters in Christ a warning, in a spirit of love and heart-level commitment to the Lord and to them, when they venture too close to the edge where they will fall into harm. It also

<sup>1</sup> Breakpoint with Charles Colson, Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1/17/2002.

<sup>2</sup> *USA Today* Snapshots (10-16-01), p. B1.

involves learning to stand ready to forgive, without any need to even the score, so that genuine renewal can take place and hope can be restored.

**I—Jim Pritchard told, “After the Civil War, in an incident recounted by Charles Flood in Lee: *The Last Years*, Robert E. Lee visited a woman who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. There she cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North or at least sympathize with her loss. But Lee—who knew the horrors of war and had suffered the pain of defeat—said, ‘Cut it down, my dear madam, and then forget it.’**

“In the late 1990s, Pete Peterson was appointed US ambassador to Vietnam. Peterson had served six years as a prisoner of war in the dreaded ‘Hanoi Hilton’ prison camp. When asked how he could return to the land where he’d endured years of starvation, brutality and torture, he replied, ‘I’m not angry. I left that at the gates of the prison when I walked out in 1972. I just left it behind me and decided to move forward with my life.’

Jim concludes: “When you’re tempted to get even with those who hurt you, remember that you can’t go back, you can’t stay where you are, but, by God’s grace, you can move forward one step at a time.”

Do we have any trees that we need to cut down and forget today?

Do we need to walk away, leave the hurt behind, and go forward under the grace and love of God? Doing so will transform our own souls and all those we touch.

## II. WE EXPRESS THE ETHICS OF JESUS WHEN WE GROW IN FAITH. 17:5-6

1. *The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith.* The Greek word translated “increase” can also simply mean “give” or “provide.” They wanted Jesus to simply give the command or do something obviously miraculous and suddenly they would be people of great faith.

2. *Jesus replied that even a small faith can be powerful.* The analogy to the mustard seed is quite striking. It is a very small seed, so the irony cannot be missed. It doesn’t take much faith, according to these words, to effect great change.

Insight: It is not the size of our faith but the object of our faith that makes it powerful and effective.

**I—*The Christian Reader* carried this little story a couple of decades ago that illustrates this point. “Ever wonder if the Lord really knows what you want and need? [the article asks].**

“David Smallbone felt God leading him to promote Christian concerts in his homeland, Australia, where only 5 percent of the people believed in Christ. When too few fans filled his seats during one major tour, however, David took a \$250,000 bath in red ink.

“Creditors repossessed his home, and the father of six looked for work elsewhere. A top artist offered him a job in Nashville, so the Smallbones sold their furniture and other possessions and purchased tickets to the United States.

“A few weeks after they arrived, however, David was informed that his position was ‘no longer available.’ He literally could not get out of bed for several days. When he and his wife explained to their children what happened, they all got on their knees and asked God to help them.

“Interesting things began to happen. God provided bags of groceries, a minivan, and odd jobs. Then the biggest surprise of all—a recording contract for David’s oldest daughter, Rebecca, age 15. She recorded her first album using an old family name, St. James.

“Flash forward to [2002].” David became the promoter of his own daughter’s sold-out concerts. Rebecca St. James became one of the most influential Christian artists in America. *Christianity Today*

magazine named her one of the top 50 up-and-coming evangelical leaders under age 40.

“All along—no surprise—God knew what he was doing!”<sup>3</sup>

FYI, Rebecca is the older brother of Joel and Luke, who together make up the duo called For King and Country. The influence of faith is bearing fruit in this family.

Jesus alone can say to us, “Just trust Me!” Everyone else might let us down, but He will not. We must be clear on the life and character that He has called us to develop. Jesus can’t bless a willfully disobedient life. But, if our hearts belong to Him, no matter how events may seem to turn against us, we can trust Him to carry us through them. Developing this frame of mind is what faith really is.

### III. WE EXPRESS THE ETHICS OF JESUS WHEN WE DO OUR DUTY. 17:7-10

1. *In the parable, Jesus stressed that it is a servant’s job to serve, not to be served.* No one would have been surprised at the direction of this teaching. The “servant” was, in Greek, a δούλος (doulos), a *slave*. The slave, by definition, looks after the needs and wants of his master before his own.

2. *When a servant has fulfilled his duty, he has done nothing unusual that requires special attention.* Again, no one would have been surprised by the lack of affirmation. There would have been no “Slave of the Day” trophy, or an “I Served” participation plaque. No wing of the house would have been named after the slave who faithfully cleaned it every day. The only “thanks” the slave might have received would have come when the slave was then allowed to eat and drink, also, after meeting the needs of his master.

I mention these because we might often be tempted to serve in order to receive the recognition of other people. Other people can be fickle. They may or may not notice earnest effort for the kingdom of God. We are called by God to “outdo one another in showing honor” (cf. Romans 12:10, ESV). This means we are looking for ways to honor others, but not that we are seeking recognition from others. But God always sees and knows. Though we may not get a pat on the head today, there is, in the future for those who serve faithfully now, this expectation: “Well done, good and faithful servant.... Come and share your master’s happiness!” (see Matthew 25:21, 23, NIV [same word for *servant* in that passage] cf. Luke 19:17—we will get to Luke 19 eventually. 😊).

Insight: Faithfulness to our duty is required of us as Jesus’ disciples. There should be no expectation on our parts that would single us out for attention because we do what is right simply because it is right.

**I—Peter Drucker has been considered the guru of the management-by-objective era of business leadership.** “In an interview in *Business 2.0*, Peter Drucker recalls this story of responsibility:

“The Depression in this country was totally unnecessary. The country was recovering from a mild recession when Europe crashed, and that started a run on American banks. Eugene Meyer (President Hoover’s chairman of the Federal Reserve Board) happened to be a friend of my father’s. And during World War II, when I was in Washington and quite lonely, he had me to dinner often. He told me this story.

“He knew perfectly well how to stop a run on the banks. You just pay out, just print money. One night they put it under their mattresses, then the next day they have to deposit it again. Meyer knew he should just pay out. He went to Hoover after the 1932 election, and Hoover said, ‘I’m just a lame-duck

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Reader* (January/February 2002), pp. 13-14; source: Luis Palau, *It’s a God Thing*, [www.palau.org/godthing](http://www.palau.org/godthing)

president. Immediate action has to be sanctioned by the president-elect.' So Meyer went to Roosevelt. But Roosevelt said, 'This is Hoover's watch.'

"I asked Meyer, 'Why didn't you just pay out?'

"He said, 'My boy, you couldn't possibly do that in 1932 without the president's approval.'

"If he had paid off the banks and stopped the run, there would have been no bank holiday and no Depression, except perhaps in the farm sector.

"Hoover and Roosevelt never met in those four months. They hated each other. Meyer said, in hindsight, he should've gone ahead without the president's approval."<sup>4</sup>

There is perhaps always a tendency for us to defer our duty and responsibility to others, to wait for someone else to make decisions and bear the consequences. Instead, *we should take responsibility for our lives, do what is right, and do so simply because it is right*, not because we think we will have an immediate reward waiting at the end of the day. If we don't care who gets the immediate credit, we can accomplish much for the kingdom of God and the good of His world. If we are only interested in instant gratification and instant gratitude, much will be left undone—or done poorly for the wrong motives.

*It is for the end of the age that we are taught to await the honor of our Master: "Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your Lord!"*

### *Take it home (applications).*

I. How about us? Have we put our faith in Christ without reservation, recognizing that He alone has what it will take for us to find true spiritual life?

II. Have we recognized that we truly have a responsibility not only to live our lives with moral integrity before the living God, but to do so with an eye on our influence on those around us? If our theology is right, then it should lead to a corresponding ethics. If we *believe* correctly, then we should *live* accordingly.

III. Are we willing to live faithfully, to do our duty before God and others, simply because it is the right thing to do? Praise from our Lord is coming, but it may not come today. Will He find us faithful whenever He might come to call an end to all of this?

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Drucker, *Business 2.0* (October 2001); submitted by Dave Goetz, president, CustomZines.