

Increase Our Faith! (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. (Luke 17:5–6)

A Fight for Faith

- A. Though I often point it out, it is worth noting again, I think, that, even as we open the Scriptures right now to read and study and hear from God, there is, indeed, an unseen war waging in this room all round about us.
1. There is an enemy of your soul who wants nothing more than to see you disengaged, dismantled, and, ultimately, destroyed. He’s been a liar and a murderer from the beginning. He parades like an angel of light, though truly he’s a prowling lion, a fiery dragon, a venomous snake.
- B. And this war, while it is certainly immediate and pressing and current and more relevant than whatever else you’ve come in here thinking about this morning . . . it is, at the same time, a war as old as Eden. It is a war that has been waging from day one.
1. It’s a war that began with the serpent’s words to Eve: [“Did God actually say . . .?” \(Gen 3:1\)](#).
- C. And he has been fighting humanity along the same lines ever since. It seems to me that the devil’s strategy has shifted little over the years. The way he began this fight is the way he’s continued it.
1. Just as then, so still today, he zeroes in on God’s words to us and attempts to twist and distort and bait us into questioning the character and heart of the One who spoke them. [“Did God actually say . . .?” \(Gen 3:1\)](#).
 - a. In other words, I suppose what I’m trying to get at in opening this way is that this war waging right now for yours and my soul is, at bottom, a fight for faith—a fight for faith in God, over and against the world, the flesh, and the devil!
- D. I wonder if you feel it? I wonder if you’ve ever been where these apostles find themselves here now in our text?
1. If you look back up in [vv. 1-4](#) you see that Jesus has just called them to forgive those who sin against them, even if it happens seven times in the same day: [“if \[your brother\] sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” \(v. 4\)](#).

- a. (1) You sin against me. I forgive you. (2) You sin against me. I forgive you. (3) You sin against me. I forgive you. (4) You sin against me. I forgive you. (5) You sin against me. I forgive you. (6) You sin against me. I forgive you. (7) You sin against me. I forgive you.
 - a. And that's just day one! We wake up tomorrow and start it all over again.
- E. So these apostles hear that this is the kind of limitless mercy and forgiveness they are called to show to others, even those who have grievously offended them, and they respond, I think appropriately, with the words there in v. 5: "Increase our faith!"
- 1. In other words: "I can't do that! I don't have that sort of thing in me. I want to harbor bitterness when someone hurts me. I want to take vengeance when I am wronged. I want to unfriend that person on Facebook and block their number on my phone and change jobs or churches or whatever just so I don't have to see them again. I don't want to forgive. If that is what I am called to as a disciple of Christ . . . increase my faith!"
- F. So again, I wonder if you've ever been with these apostles here? Have you ever heard God's word to you and thought: "O I hear what you're saying God. I just don't know if I believe it. I just don't know if I can walk this out. Did God actually say . . .?!"
- 1. You open the Scriptures and you hear God say through Paul that "for those who love [Him] all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).
 - a. And you look around at the broken heap that's become of our life and think: "No way! Not this. There's no good that's going to come from this." Another lost job. Another dead loved one. Another heart-wrenching breakup. Another unfavorable diagnosis. Another shattered dream.
 - a. Did God actually say He is up to good for me in this? I don't think so! I think God is trying to hurt me. I think God is out to get me!
 - 2. You open the Scriptures and you hear God say through the psalmist: "^{9b} [T]he rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.¹¹ . . . [B]y them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward" (Psa 19:9b–11). His rules are good? More valuable than gold? Sweeter than honey? There's reward in this? That's not how I'm experiencing them right now.
 - a. You see, I want to sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend. All of my friends are doing it? Everyone on TV is doing it? But God and His rules say: "No!"
 - b. I want to flirt with that girl at the office, yeah I know that I'm married but you don't know how my wife's been treating me lately. I just want to see where this goes with someone who seems to actually be interested in me. But God and His rules say: "No!"
 - c. I've struggled with homosexual inclinations since puberty. At the time it was a shameful thing but now in our culture these days people are coming out of the

closet in droves and celebrating—there’s a whole month set aside to celebrate people like me. Even a number of churches are lifting up anchor from the Scriptures and joining in with them. But, in my honest moments, I can see quite plainly, God and His rules say: “No!”

- a. Let me tell you something: These rules don’t taste sweet. Sweetness would be indulging my desire. Obedience on this point is much more a bitterness than anything else.

- (1) Did God actually say that there is pleasure for me in this, that there is reward for me in this? I don’t think so! I think God is holding out on me. I think God is trying to keep me from what He knows would truly satisfy!

G. Have you ever been there? You open up this Book and you read, and you come away saying: “If that’s true, if that’s what You’re doing, if that’s what You’re calling me to do, if that’s where this is going . . . increase my faith . . . because, right now, I don’t have it.”

H. Well, that’s what my next two sermons are going to be about. All under the banner of this plea—“Increase Our Faith!”—I anticipate looking at four things in particular: (1) The Nature of Faith; (2) The Gift of Faith; (3) The Effect of Faith; and (4) The Humility of Faith. We’re going to take up the first two this morning.

(1) The Nature of Faith

Three Aspects

A. It occurs to me that before we can really deal with this idea of increasing our faith, we must make sure we have a good sense of what faith actually is.

- 1. Now, for this we might think to go straight to the definition given to us in Scripture. For those of you who know your Bibles you might be aware that the author of Hebrews actually defines faith for us. And he puts it this way: “[F]aith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

- a. Certainly there is much here and we could spend quite a while on it, but I have also found the threefold definition of faith that was forged at the time of the Reformation to be supremely helpful in making sense of the matter quickly and succinctly.

- a. In many ways it takes what is said in Hebrews here and fills it out a bit more for us. Let me show you what I mean.

B. For this, I want to lean in on the now deceased brilliant theologian: R.C. Sproul. If you’re familiar at all with his ministry, you know he was always so skilled at taking lofty theological truths and bringing them down to the ground so that common folk like myself could benefit from them.

1. So let me just read to you for a moment what he has to say on this point: “I think the whole concept of faith is one of the most misunderstood ideas that we have, misunderstood not only by the world but by the church itself. The very basis for our redemption, the way in which we are justified by God, is through faith. The Bible is constantly talking to us about faith, and if we misunderstand that, we’re in deep trouble.

The great issue of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was, How is a person justified? Luther’s controversial position was that we are justified by faith alone. When he said that, many of the godly leaders in the Roman Catholic Church were very upset. They said, “Does that mean that a person can just believe in Jesus and then live any way they want to live?” In other words, the Roman Catholic Church reacted fiercely because they were afraid that Luther’s view would be understood as an easy-believism in which a person only had to believe and never had to be concerned about bringing forth the fruits of righteousness. It was crucial that those who were involved in the Protestant Reformation carefully define what they meant by saving faith. So they went back and did their studies in the New Testament, specifically on the Greek word *pistein*, which means “to believe,” and they were able to isolate three distinctive aspects of biblical faith.” And now here I’m just going to summarize . . .

Aspect #1: Notitia = Content

- A. The first is identified by the Latin word Notitia. For us, we might sum it up with the word: Content.
 1. The idea here is that faith has an object. It is faith in something or someone. Faith doesn’t just float out here somewhere in and of itself. It attaches to God, His Word, His Son.
- B. This is what Paul is getting at when he writes in [Rom 10](#): “¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? . . . [dropping down to v. 17] ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (vv. 14, 17).
 1. So, for it to be biblical, saving faith, attaches to content, the word of God, the Gospel, and really, through that, the person of Jesus Christ. But it starts with Content . . .

Aspect #2: Assensus = Assent

- A. The second aspect of biblical faith put forward by the Reformers is identified by the Latin word Assensus. For us, we can put on this the English word: Assent.
 1. To assent to something is to express approval of it or agreement with it. It take the content, in other words, and says: “Yes and amen! That is true.”
- B. Now, we might be prone to think that true biblical, saving faith really could stop there, but this won’t hold when once we really think about it. You see, James says something quite profound about the demons and the faith that they have in God. Listen: “¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19).
 1. In other words, it is a good thing that you believe in the content of the word of God and what it says about Him—that He is one among other things. But assent is not enough. The

demons know more about God than you or I do and they assent to it all, they know it is true. The difference is they don't delight in what they know to be true of Him, they shudder at the thought of it. They hate it!

- a. So Content and mere Assent are not enough . . .

Aspect #3: Fiducia = Trust

A. And this leads to the third and final piece. It is identified by the Latin word Fiducia, but we might sum it up in English with the word: Trust.

1. Here we have the idea not just of knowing the right things and agreeing that they are true, but, because we know these things and because we know that they are true, we now place our personal trust and reliance in them and the One revealed to us in and through it all.

- a. We know. We agree. We trust. That's the biblical understanding of faith. That's what faith is.

B. That's what these apostles are asking Jesus to increase.

1. "I hear the Content—that I must forgive those who sin against me. I Assent that such a thing would be good and right. But I am struggling to Trust you in walking that out. I still want to take matters into my own hands. I still default to self-preservation. I still spiral into cycles of vengeance and eye for an eye. Help me to trust you—and as I do enable me, O Jesus, to love my enemies, to bless those who curse me, and to pray for those who persecute me . . . Increase my faith!"

(2) The Gift of Faith

The Request and What's Implied

A. Now, having a better sense of what faith is, I think we are ready to deal with the request from these apostles itself: "[The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'](#)" (v. 5).

B. What I want to bring out for us here at this point is that truth which is clearly standing behind this request and is, no doubt, plainly implied in it. And that is that faith, ultimately, is a gift from God.

1. Think about it. The request from these apostles that the Lord increase their faith is nonsensical and a waste of breath if, in fact, Jesus cannot increase it or influence it in any way—if faith is something that must come from me and me alone.

- a. No! The implicit truth guiding them here is that mysterious reality that our faith in Jesus ultimately comes from Jesus. Therefore, we can come to Him in our moments of doubt and ask Him to increase it!

C. It's really the same sort of thing we see with that father I reference often in [Mark 9](#). His son had been pillaged by demons since childhood and when he sees Jesus in his desperation he begins to

plead with Him: “²² [I]f you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.’²³ And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can”! All things are possible for one who believes.’²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (vv. 22–24).

1. “I want to believe You can do this Jesus, but I’m struggling. I need You to help me believe in You!”
- D. I wonder if you’ve ever sung that old hymn *Come Thou Fount*. Isn’t the most moving part of the whole song when we come to those lines near the end: “*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love; Here’s my heart, oh take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above.*”
1. Those words mean so much to me because that’s the reality I live in. If left to myself, my heart is wandering. And my only hope of making it to glory is if God in Christ by way of His Spirit would take my heart and seal it and thereby keep me trusting, keep me believing, keep me in the faith.
 - a. You see, again, faith in Jesus is a gift from Jesus. It’s something we need Him to implant and increase in us or it won’t happen.

Making the Case

- A. Now, there are a number of ways I could try to make the case for this from Scripture. But let me just come at it from one angle here at first . . .
- B. I imagine, if I were to ask you to list out some of the Christians with greatest faith throughout history, undoubtedly, these early apostles would have to make the list.
 1. After all, it was said of them in [Acts 17:6](#) that, for Jesus’ sake, these men had “*turned the world upside down.*” And they did it at the expense of their own lives. Tradition has it that nearly all of them died a martyr’s death and certainly all of them suffered immense persecution for the gospel.
 - a. Whatever else these men were, certainly we can say they were men of great faith!
- C. And yet, when we read the gospels carefully, we come to find that this has not always been the case. In fact, the one unfortunate thing that seems to be true of all of them is that on the night Jesus was betrayed, at the time Jesus needed them the most, they all, we could say, fell away.
 1. Now, I’m not saying they ceased to be Christians at that point. I’m not saying I know when exactly the apostles were born again and saved. Perhaps it happened earlier, perhaps it happened later.
 - a. But I am saying that clear as day on the pages of the gospel records is the fact that they clearly did not have the ability to believe in and of themselves, in spite of their own self-confidence to the contrary.
- D. That’s what we read of there in [Matt 26:31-35](#), where Jesus is out on the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper, the shadow of the cross is now thick upon Him, and He has this conversation with

them: “³¹ Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.’³³ Peter answered him, ‘Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.’³⁴ Jesus said to him, ‘Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.’³⁵ Peter said to him, ‘Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!’ And all the disciples said the same.”

1. You see Peter and the other apostles think that great faith is in them. “We got this Lord!” But Jesus knows better.
 - a. And then just a few verses later we watch it all play out. When the great crowd shows up with Judas under cloak of night to lay hold of Jesus, we read in [v. 56](#): “Then all the disciples left him and fled.” And, of course, a few hours later that evening, Peter would deny ever knowing Him three times, just as He said.
- E. But their faithlessness doesn’t stop here. Now, three days have passed since Christ’s crucifixion and burial. And just as He had predicted many times during His earthly ministry and even again there in [Matt 26:32](#), He rose from the dead victorious over Satan, sin, and death. And so we read in [Luke 24:1-11](#): “¹ But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb,³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”⁸ And they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles,¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”
 1. An “idle tale”! He told them explicitly at least three times we know from the gospels that He would suffer, die, and on the third die rise. And they hear these ladies claiming: “It has happened just as He said!”—and they respond: “Ridiculous! You women have lost touch with reality.”
- F. But, again, their faithlessness doesn’t stop here. Jesus Himself then shows up to them, while they’re gathered together, cowering behind wall and door. And even though they are looking at the resurrected Lord Himself, still they are struggling to believe. So He says to them: “³⁸ ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet” ([Luke 24:38–40](#)).
- G. And, of course, who could forget “Doubting Thomas” who, as it turns out, was not with the apostles this first time when Jesus appeared to them: “²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” ([John 20:24–25](#)).

- H. And we know that Jesus does draw near to Thomas and encourage his faith and things, but then, amazingly, as we follow along in Matthew's gospel, we come to the very end when Jesus is ascending to heaven from some mountain there in Galilee and we read in [Matt 28:17](#): "And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted." Jesus is rising into the sky and some are going: "I don't know about all of this."

How Did They Come to Believe?!

- A. We're left with the question, then, after all of this: How did they come to believe?! How did they go from this to the sort of thing we read about in the book of Acts and we know from history—where, though they are still imperfect and dealing with sin no doubt, suddenly they are standing boldly and giving their lives for this Jesus they couldn't bring themselves to believe in even in the face of so much indisputable evidence?
1. For the answer, of course, we could point to Pentecost and the falling of the Holy Spirit, whereby they are filled, not just with tongues and things, but with faith.
 2. But there is another place I would rather take us for the answer at this point. You see, back when Jesus was talking with Peter about his forthcoming denials and things, Luke tells us a bit more than Matthew or Mark about what was said. And it's amazing! [Luke 22:31-32](#), Jesus says this: "³¹ Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."
 - a. Peter's faith doesn't fail, the other Apostles' faith doesn't fail, because Christ won't allow it! Because Christ is interceding for it. Because Christ is upholding it and seeing to its increase. Because faith is not something ultimately of me, it is a gift of almighty God!

Everywhere in Scripture

- A. And this, in case you are still not convinced, is the clear teaching everywhere in Scripture:
1. [Acts 13:48](#): "And when the Gentiles heard [the preaching of Paul and Barnabas], they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." It is not the other way around: Because they believed they were appointed to eternal life? No! That's not what the text says. Because God had seen fit in His sovereign grace to appoint these hard-hearted sinners to eternal life, as they heard the gospel proclaimed by Paul and Barnabas, God opened their hearts to believe.
 2. [Rom 12:3](#): "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." If you have any faith in Jesus at all, it's because God has assigned it to you.
 3. [1 Cor 2:14](#): "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." We need the Spirit if we are to accept and understand the things of the Spirit. If the Spirit of

God doesn't move on me in grace and open my eyes and my heart I will not receive God's word by faith. It will be foolish to me and I will turn away from it.

4. This is why Paul comes out later in this same letter, [1 Cor 12:3](#) and writes: “[N]o one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” It is not in natural, fallen man to bend his knee in submission and devotion to Jesus. When you see that happening, you can know one thing for sure: the Spirit of God is at work on that person!
5. [Phil 1:29](#): “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should . . . believe in him . . .” You believe in Him because it has been granted to you.
6. [2 Th 2:13-14](#): “¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Because God chose you to be saved, you believe.
7. [1 Pet 1:3-5](#): “³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” It may be your faith, but it is God's power upholding that faith, guarding your through it, and keeping you in it to the end!
8. And, of course, I've saved for last, that text you probably thought I'd go to first, [Eph 2:8](#): “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

Conclusion

- A. So there you are, on Monday morning, with the Scriptures open in your lap.
 1. You read of the radical forgiveness Jesus is calling you to show those who have sinned against you.
 2. You read that He is, even in your trials, working for your good.
 3. You read that His rules are precious and sweet and there is great reward for following them.
 - a. You get the content. You may even agree that God is right and good in what He says. But you are struggling to trust, to truly believe, to walk this out with Him. The devil is close at hand. You hear the hiss of his voice. “[Did God actually say?](#)”
 - a. What do you do?
- B. Well, in light of our text and all that we've looked at this morning, let's be clear:
 1. You don't try to muster up faith in and of yourself in those moments. It isn't in you!

2. No. Instead you get down on your face, you lift your hands up to the Son of God crucified and raised for you, the One who lives at the Father's right hand to make intercession for you, and you cry out for His help: "I believe, help my unbelief! O Jesus, increase my faith!"
 - a. And as you pray, and as you plead, the Spirit of Christ falls afresh . . . and you believe!
- C. All praise be to Christ ["the author and finisher of our faith"](#) (Heb 12:2 NKJV)!