

# Increase Our Faith! (Part 2)

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## Introduction

### The Text

[We're going to be focusing in on vv. 5-6 this morning, but I wanted to read back from v. 1 to give context that will come into play later as we go] <sup>1</sup>And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!" <sup>2</sup>It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. <sup>3</sup>Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, <sup>4</sup>and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" <sup>6</sup>And 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 17:1-6)

### Part 2 of 3

A. I don't know if you remember, but I actually mentioned last time where I would be going this time. I told you there'd be two sermons . . . well, there will be three. As you can tell from the title I've given these sermons, the banner I'm lifting high over them are these words spoken here in v. 5 by the Apostles to Jesus: "Increase our faith!"

1. And under this raised banner I said we will be 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.

a. The first two we addressed last time. The third we shall pick up today. And the fourth we shall consider when we carry on into [Luke 17:7-10](#) next time.

B. So then, briefly catching us up to speed, let me remind us something of what we said under the first two headings.

#### (1) The Nature of Faith

A. With regard to the Nature of Faith it was my sense that we really couldn't talk properly about this idea of increasing faith and operating in faith and what not, if we had a fundamental misunderstanding of what faith actually is, biblically speaking.

1. So I took us back to the three aspects of faith that really emerged and crystallized at the time of the reformation. And you'll remember I quoted three fancy Latin words that I won't bore you with here again.

a. But the English words were: (1) Content – biblical faith has an object, namely God and His gospel; (2) Assent – biblical faith agrees with the content concerning God and His gospel; and finally (3) Trust – biblical faith doesn't just agree that the

content is true, it personally trusts in the God and gospel revealed, it throws itself on Him as one's only hope for salvation and life and joy.

- B. Now, mark this because this definition will help us as we come to the new content here this morning.

## (2) The Gift of Faith

- A. But, before we get there, let me remind you as well something of what we said regarding Faith as a Gift.

- B. In my devotions, I just finished reading through the longest Psalm in the Bible—which is, consequently, also the longest chapter in the Bible—[Psa 119](#) . . . 176 verses! And the whole thing ends there in [v. 176](#) with the Psalmist saying this: [“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant . . .”](#) ([v. 176a](#)).

- 1. In other words: “I have wandered off, O God, and my only hope of getting back on track and staying on track is if You come after me, if You come and find me! My heart, it goes here or there; my faith, it comes in and out; my doubts, they are often debilitating. If I am going to make it, You have to do it!”

- a. Now, that's, in essence, what these Apostles are saying when they cry out: [“Increase our faith!”](#) They hear the call from Jesus to forgive those who sin against them seven times in a day, and they say: “If that's the call, You've got to do it. We don't have that kind of thing in us. Increase our faith!”

- C. And I drew out from their request here the clear implication that faith in Jesus is, ultimately, a gift from Jesus. The request for Jesus to increase faith presupposes the fact that He can and does, in fact, do so. We need Him to help us believe in Him.

- 1. If you feel like you come in this morning just hanging onto Jesus by a thread, take heart! Christ is the one who has granted and is upholding your faith!

## (3) The Effect of Faith

- A. But now, we come to this third heading and must ask: To what end is all of this? What is the point of faith? Or, put another way: What is the effect of it? What does it do? What does it look like when it is in operation?

- B. With this, then, we come to focus in really on [v. 6](#) in particular and Jesus' response to the Apostles' request. Look at it once more: [“And 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.’”](#)

- C. That's what we're going to deal with this morning. What in the world does Jesus mean here? He's talking about what you can do, what the effect would be, if you had faith. And I will just tell you up front, confusion abounds on this point. But we'll get into it and hopefully clear some of that away.

1. I'm going to divide what Jesus says here into two parts really just borrowing from the agrarian imagery that He provides us with. (1) First, we'll talk about Mustard Seeds. And then (2) we'll talk about Mulberry Trees.

## (1) Mustard Seeds

### Cutting in Two Directions

- A. The mustard seed was proverbial in Jesus' day for its small size. It was the smallest seed known of around Palestine in Jesus' day. When the seed was held in one's hand it would look something like a speck of dust—barely visible.
- B. Now, it seems to me that this image Jesus gives us here of faith the size of mustard seed is used by Him to cut in two different directions.

#### Direction #1: The Smallness of Their Faith

- A. On the one hand, I do think it is something of a subtle rebuke of the Apostles here. The idea, I think, is that, if even a ridiculously small amount of faith could accomplish such great feats, how small, how microscopic must their faith be if they couldn't even dream of doing such a thing?
- B. This is why one of the things Jesus is always saying to His disciples as He's going about ministering, teaching, and working miracles is: "O you of little faith!" That little phrase shows up four times in Matthew's gospel alone:
  1. In [Matt 6:30](#), He says it to those worried about whether God will truly provide for their needs: "[I]f God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"
  2. In [Matt 8:26](#), when the disciples are freaking out thinking they are dying in a storm at sea, we read: "And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm."
  3. In [Matt 14:31](#), by faith Peter is walking on water towards Jesus but then his eyes catch sight of the wind and waves and he starts to sink and we read: "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?'"
  4. In [Matt 16:8-9a](#), after the disciples had already seen Jesus feed the 5000 from five loaves and the 4000 from seven loaves, yet still they are here concerned with the fact that they forget to bring bread along on their journey and they're worried about what they're going to eat, Jesus says: "<sup>8</sup> O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? <sup>9a</sup> Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember . . .?"
- C. So there is something to this. Jesus is always having to address the smallness of their faith. And I think He's getting at something similar here in v. 6 of our text. "If I were to place a mustard seed in your hand you could barely see it, and I'm telling you if you even had that much faith, O the effect would be spectacular."

#### Direction #2: The Greatness of Their God

- A. Well, I suppose this leads to the other direction I think Jesus is cutting with this image, and I am happy to say it is far more encouraging than the first. You see, by talking about the great effect such a small amount of faith can produce, Jesus is highlighting the supremacy not of faith itself but of the object of that faith, namely God. Such little faith can manifest such magnificent results not because faith is just that potent, but because God is just that great!
1. As Thomas Schreiner writes on this point: “Mustard seed faith is enormously powerful—not because of our faith, but because it unites us to the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”
- B. Think for a moment, Christian, how it is that you got saved.
1. You were born in sin and quickly enslaved by it. You were an enemy of God, a child of wrath. You stood justly condemned before Him. Your whole life was lived under the threat and curse of death.
  2. And then . . . in steps Christ. He takes on Himself your sin, your debt, your condemnation. He goes to the cross and there drinks down the cup of God’s wrath which had been reserved for you. He takes the curse. He takes the death. And then He rises up from the grave victorious over it all.
  3. And what’s required of you to participate in His magnificent victory?
    - a. A little mustard seed of faith. Just reach out and touch the fringe of His garment and it’s yours! All you did was throw yourself down at the foot of the cross and cry out, “Help!”—and Jesus took care of the rest. A mustard seed of faith . . . an eternity of glory!
- C. So that’s the sort of thing we’re talking about here. While, certainly, it is important that our faith in God increases and grows, we must not mistakenly think that the sheer size of our faith is important in itself. The most important factor in all of this is not the size of our faith but the size of our God.
1. Little faith in a great God goes an unimaginably long way!

## (2) Mulberry Trees

### What Does Jesus Mean?!

- A. And this leads us, I suppose, into our discussion of the Mulberry Tree. While there is some ambiguity in the Greek as to which tree Jesus is actually referring to here, there is relative scholarly consensus that it is, in fact, the mulberry tree that’s in view.
1. Now this is relevant because Jewish rabbis describe the root system of the mulberry as so vast and stubborn that the tree itself could often live some 500 years because of it. In fact, Jewish law prescribed that this kind of tree could not be planted within 75 feet of a cistern lest its roots sprawl out and mess things up.

- B. The point in all of this is that—when Jesus says that someone with a mustard seed of faith “could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey [him]”—we are supposed to see this as a great and miraculous feat indeed!
- C. Now, here we come full speed towards this idea of faith’s effect and it is at this point that we start to especially encounter those misunderstandings I referenced at the beginning. What exactly is Jesus saying faith can accomplish here? What does such a thing mean: If I have faith I speak to a tree and it is uprooted from before me?
  - 1. This sounds like something out of Harry Potter. Like some sort of hocus pocus thing, using spells and what no. Or maybe a Star Wars sort of thing, using the Force. We speak with this faith in operation and what we declare just happens. The universe obeys.
    - a. Well, that sounds kind of cool, a little scary, but pretty cool. But what exactly does Jesus mean by this?

## Similar Statements Elsewhere in Scripture

- A. Now, before we make our way towards an interpretation, I wanted to bring in similar statements from elsewhere in the Scriptures. You see this is not just a one-off from Christ. This is actually something that the Bible teaches. So we’re going to need to wrestle with this. And these other texts will help us as we try to get a fuller picture on the matter.
  - 1. So in [Matt 17:19-20](#), Jesus is talking to His disciples, having a similar conversation to the one He is having in our text back in Luke. The disciples couldn’t cast out a demon that had been terrorizing this poor young boy and so the father brings his son to Jesus. And with one word from His mouth the devil is sent running. And then we read this: “<sup>19</sup> [T]he disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ <sup>20</sup> He said to them, ‘Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.’”
    - a. So now we’re talking about not just mulberry trees being moved, but mountains. And it’s that last phrase, in particular, that I want you to hear: with faith . . . “nothing will be impossible for you.” Mark, in his account of the story, puts it positively in [Mark 9:23](#): “All things are possible for one who believes.”
      - i. Really?! What does that mean? Is this just Walt Disney Christianity? Do you remember what Cinderella sings to the birds and those little mice she is always hanging out with: “No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true.”
        - (1) Is that what this is? Well, let me give you a few more . . .
  - 2. In [Mark 11](#), the disciples see the fig tree that Jesus had cursed with just a few words from His mouth and it had withered away to its roots. And they marveled at this! But, [vv. 22-24](#), “<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but

believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. <sup>24</sup>Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

3. Jesus says something similar to His disciples in John 15:7: “[A]sk whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”
4. James 1:5-8 follows the same line of logic and fills it out a bit more: “<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” And later in 4:2, he goes on to say: “You do not have, because you do not ask.”

## One Common Distortion

- A. Okay, so what in the world are we supposed to make of this?
- B. I’ll tell you what prosperity gospel preachers and word-of-faith preachers have made of it. They say that because of Christ’s death and resurrection triumph you can now name and claim health, wealth, and prosperity for yourself . . . by faith, of course. And if you try to name it but don’t receive it, it’s not on God, it’s on you. You’re not asking or declaring in faith. There’s something wrong with your faith.
- C. The grave error here, it seems to me, is that these preachers take these texts to mean there’s almost this sort of raw, impersonal power out there in the universe. And it can be harnessed and manipulated by faith. You can grab ahold of it by faith and subject it to your will. They see in these verses that God has given them a blank check, as it were. And faith is how you write on that thing and take it to the bank.
  1. In the end, such conceptions of God, the gospel, and faith become a trojan horse for greed. It might look like you are trusting in, serving, loving, and worshiping God. But truly there is nothing here beyond worship of self!

## Two Corrective Principles

- A. So what does Jesus mean, if not this? Let me give you two corrective principles that derive really from the context of all those verses I just referenced.

### Corrective Principle #1: Faith Is Abiding in a Person

- A. This brings us back to that threefold definition of faith I referenced at the beginning. You see, when we treat faith as if it were the way we harness raw power and subject it to our will or the way we cash a blank check from God for whatever amount we desire, we completely miss the fact that faith is first and foremost and fundamentally knowing, loving, trusting, resting, abiding in a person: namely, Jesus Christ.

- B. This is the context of the verse I read you from [John 15](#). Look at it now: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7). That’s v. 7 in its entirety! And it makes all the difference, doesn’t it?!
1. It’s not “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” full stop. It’s “if you abide in me, and my word abides in you . . .” then whatever you ask for will be done.
    - a. But don’t you see, the things you’ll ask for, the manner in which you’ll ask for them, the motivations behind your asking, all of that has changed, if you are abiding in Him and His word is abiding in you.
- C. This is not raw, unharnessed power. This is not a blank check. This is a relationship. And any authority or power we wield in the spiritual and physical dimensions ultimately comes not from us, but from Him. And, therefore, it is ultimately subject not to our will, but to His.
- D. So I can’t just muster up enough faith and say to my empty wallet: “Let there be a Benjamin” and suddenly I have enough in there for date night or whatever.
1. Now God could do that. Peter’s taxes show up in a fish’s mouth. But it’s not my will and word that’s decisive here, it’s His. And I’m just trying to surrender, submit, and walk in line with that. I’m trying to be in step with Him. That’s the point.
- E. This is what was so off with Simon the Magician’s approach to the whole thing in [Acts 8](#). When he saw the power and miracles being worked by the Apostles. He comes up to them with money and wants to try to buy it. Let me have some of that.
1. But he doesn’t get. He wanted power without the person.
- F. This is the whole problem with those folks Jesus speaks of in [Matt 7:21-23](#): “<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”
1. Somehow these guys do have access to power and things. But they missed the fact that it should be tied to deep, abiding, relationship with Jesus and the Father. It’s knowing Him and doing the Father’s will that matter in the end, regardless of whatever mighty works can accomplish by alternate methods.

## Corrective Principle #2: Love Is the Deeper Miracle

- A. We consider this idea of a mulberry tree being uprooted and thrown into the sea with a few words from our mouth and it sounds spectacular. What a sight that would be!
1. But we’re left wondering how we should interpret this image in particular? Is Jesus speaking literally here or is He referring to something else?

- a. Well, again, the context of our text here in Luke as well as of the other texts I referenced, comes in to help us.
  
- B. In [Luke 17](#) itself, I read [vv. 1-4](#) so you could, once more, see [vv. 5-6](#) in the larger flow of the narrative. Jesus calls for radical forgiveness. The Apostles hear this and ask for Jesus to increase their faith. He says okay and when I do you can take a mulberry tree and throw into the sea.
  - 1. So what is the mulberry tree? In context, it seems like it's referring to the ability to forgive. It's perhaps a reference to the deep roots of bitterness that can often spread abroad in the hearts even of God's children. And He's saying, "With a mustard seed of faith in Me, you can pull that tree up by the roots and throw into the sea. You don't have to be bitter anymore. You don't have to hold onto the grudge anymore. You don't have to keep that person locked away in your prison any longer. What I'm going to accomplish on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins before God will also provide you with the resources in the Spirit to forgive those who sin against you."
    - a. You see, we would get all excited about a mulberry tree being thrown into the sea. What a miracle we would say! But Jesus gets far more excited about a person who learns the way of forgiveness. That's the deeper miracle in God's economy.
      - i. This same basic idea of love as the deeper miracle that faith in Christ effects, continues to show up in the contexts of all those other texts I referenced.
  
- C. In [Matt 17](#), immediately following Jesus' declaration that "[nothing will be impossible for you](#)" ([v. 20](#)), Jesus goes on in [vv. 22-23](#) to speak of His impending death.
  - 1. When we hear that nothing will be impossible for us that has a triumphant ring to it. We like the sound of that. We imagine it means we shall never lose, nor suffer, nor die. Far be it from us!
    - a. But Jesus immediately pushes back on this notion. Sometimes through faith we are not saved from the suffering but given the strength to endure it. Sometimes through faith our lives are not preserved but laid down in love for others.
      - i. How impossible does such self-sacrificial love sound in this day of selfies and egocentrism? Well, in Christ, all things are possible for one who believes!
  
- D. In [Mark 11](#), it's amazing, Jesus promises: "[\[W\]hatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours](#)" ([v. 24](#)) and immediately in [v. 25](#), He goes on, as in [Luke 17](#), to speak of forgiveness: "[And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone . . .](#)"
  - 1. "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe and it will be yours . . . and ask for God to help you forgive!"
  
- E. It's the same thing in James. I read you [James 4:2](#): "[You do not have, because you do not ask.](#)" And here we get, of course, the blank check notion. But James immediately pushes back on that in [v. 3](#): "[You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.](#)"



1. The miracles, the answered prayers, it's not about signs and wonders in themselves, it's about love. It's about the spread of the gospel and the glory of God. If you ask simply to line your own pockets and secure your own ease, you shall not receive it, because you are not abiding in Christ and praying with a view to the deeper miracle of love.
- F. This, of course, is why, Paul, in his extended discussion of the miraculous and spiritual gifts in [1 Cor 12-14](#) hits pause, as it were, in the middle of that discussion to make sure we don't get things out of order: "[1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing](#)" (1 Cor 13:1-2).
1. As far as God is concerned: I've accomplished nothing, I've advanced nothing, I am nothing. He is not impressed with our flash and flare. He wants to see our love. Let any flash and flare follow out from love, or let it not come at all!
- G. Now, to be clear, when we are abiding in Christ and moving out in love for others, God may in fact do the more surface miracle as well. He may heal the body, He may provide in some miraculous way, what you ask for He may grant.
1. I remember reading stories of God doing this for George Mueller. Because he poured out his life for orphans and the lost, God was pleased to answer his prayers in miraculous ways. Money would just show up when he or the kids at his orphanages needed it.
    - a. But it's because it wasn't just about him, you see? It was coming out of a deep relationship with Jesus and a deep love for others and a desire to advance the kingdom of God.
- H. God wants to answer our prayers. He wants to do the miracle—both the deeper and the surface—but such things, you see, follow along the guardrails of these two corrective principles: (1) Faith Is Abiding in a Person; and (2) Love Is the Deeper Miracle.
- I. Let me just close by asking a few questions for you to consider:
1. Are you pursuing the surface miracles of signs and wonders and external healings and things but not all that interested in the deeper miracles of heart change and forgiveness and love?
  2. When you pray, be honest, are you requesting things merely out of love for yourself or out of love for God and others?
  3. Are you abiding in Jesus—in His word and will? Are you surrendered to Him, giving Him the first and last word? Are you trusting Him with everything in your life? Let's go to Him now and make sure that it is so!