

MUSTARD SEED FAITH

TEXT: Luke 17:5-10

Okay. Let's face it. Discipleship is demanding. Throughout the Gospel of Luke Jesus pushes his disciples pretty hard. Ever since he began his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus has been taking his time, but moving quite intentionally into the hands of those who would kill him. He commissions 70 disciples, jousts with a lawyer who wants to know who his neighbor really is, and he teaches them to pray. He has really difficult words for the Pharisees and scribes, for the rich, for those who have power, and then he tells the disciples not to be anxious, not to worry, which I don't imagine was very helpful at that point.

He tells his loyal followers that things will get hard, so don't screw it up. It would be better for a big stone to be hung around their neck and they be dropped into the sea than for them to stumble. If someone sins, no matter what they do, seven times a day, you have to turn back to them, you have to forgive them, Jesus says. *No wonder they ask for their faith to be increased!* They are exhausted! I am, just walking through what the disciples have lived in these chapters of Luke. This kind of discipleship is demanding. It is painful. They didn't get into this discipleship thing entirely for some kind of reward. But it would be nice to have some kind of a break.

By now the disciples were simply asking for help. *Jesus, give us the faith to do this better. You talk about being on guard, you talk about forgiveness...and we want to follow, we really do. But we need you to help us out here, so we can embody this great love to which you call us...*

Give us the faith. Help us to do what you ask of us. We really want to follow you and we want to be the ones who carry on your work. But it is hard and it takes unbridled faith to do it. We need deeper faith. "Sure," Jesus says as he hands them some mustard seeds. And he handed them a challenge. He talked to them about servants - slaves, actually, and how they do their required duties and how their masters treat them. This is

perhaps a teaching on humility. It contrasts to the religious self-righteous who thought that their good works earned them something from God, the underlying premise of their actions being that by obeying God's commandments, God somehow became obligated to them.

The transition from seeking greater faith to a parable describing the relationship of a master and a servant has always seemed to me like a big jump. So we need to look at the parable and make some sense of it.

The story is hypothetical, but it's set in reality. There is no record that any of the disciples had a slave, and none are recorded to have been farmers. However, the story is one that they and all those listening could easily understand because slavery was normal in the Roman world. The relationship between slaves and masters was well known. Jesus uses this as a simple illustration of the true relationship we have with our God. God is our creator. God is our master. We are simply creatures which God has made for God's own purposes. That God provides and cares for us is a reflection of God's character, not of our value. That God has mercy and grace to redeem us from our sinful state and adopt us into God's family is also a reflection of God's nature, not our worthiness. In biblical times a master provided all the necessities of life to his servant as the servant faithfully fulfilled his expected duties. Because of this, there was no need for the master to give any special thanks to his servant or to feel indebted to him for performing those duties.

Jesus makes it plain and clear here. Even if we somehow manage to keep every single one of God's commandments and serve God perfectly according to every aspect of God's will then we will have only done what we were supposed to do. We will only have accomplished the purpose of our creation. We will have earned nothing from God, and God has no obligation to reward us. We only have a continuing obligation to serve God. No matter how well we keep the commandments, we are always indebted to God.

So, I hope that gives some understanding of the parable, but does it connect seeking more faith (Point A) with striving to do what God wants from us (Point B)? In other words, how does striving to do all that our Heavenly Father commands increase our faith?

Well, first of all, Jesus seems to be teaching that very little faith is required in order to accomplish incredible things. The disciples' request implies that what Jesus required of them necessitated great faith, and that their supply was deficient. So, they asked Jesus for more faith, assuming that they did not have enough. Jesus' answer was that it took only a very little quantity of faith to achieve much. With the quantity of faith equivalent to that of a mustard seed – a very small seed indeed – they could uproot a tree and transplant it into the sea. Did they then need more faith – really? Jesus' answer seems to question their premise that they had too little faith.

Then, Jesus purposely used an illustration of the power of faith which did not relate directly to forgiveness. When “faith-brokers” today speak to men about exercising faith, they do so with the most “tempting” illustrations, illustrations which incite the gullible listener to action. They tell a person, for example, if you have the faith to send in \$10, God will bless you with \$100. With enough faith, the televangelists tell us, we can conquer doubt, illness, even economic hardship. If Jesus wanted his disciples to exercise faith, would he not have used the illustration which showed that faith would produce incredible forgiveness? Instead, Jesus taught them that faith in the quantity of a mustard seed would enable them to command a tree to be uprooted and to be transplanted in the sea. Who cares? Who is interested in transplanting trees in this way? Jesus used this illustration to prove his point, but not to motivate them to exercise faith for their personal gain.

The request to increase our faith, the belief that if I had more faith things would be different, reveals, at best, a misunderstanding of faith itself and, at worst, demonstrates our own unfaithfulness. Jesus is very clear that faithfulness is not about size or quantity. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...”

Faith will not change the circumstances of our lives. Instead, it changes us. Living in faith does not shield us from the pain and difficulties of life, it does not undo the past, and it will not guarantee a particular future. Rather, faith is the means by which we face and deal with the circumstances of life – the difficulties and losses, the joys and successes, the opportunities and possibilities.

Faith does not get us a pat on the back, a reward, or a promotion in God’s eyes. It is simply the way in which we live and move and have our being so that, at the end of the day, the faithful ones can say, without pride or shame, “We have done only what we ought to have done!” Nothing more and nothing less. We have lived in openness to, trust in, and love for Christ. We have allowed him to guide our decisions, our words, and our actions. We have been sustained by him in both life and death.

Faith, however, is not lived out in the abstract. It is practiced day after day in the ordinary everyday circumstances. Some days when the pain and heaviness of life seem more than we can carry it is by faith, relationship with Jesus, that we get up each morning and face the reality of life. When we feel the pain of the world and respond with compassion by feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, speaking for justice; when we experience the brokenness of a relationship and offer forgiveness and mercy, when we see the downtrodden and offer our presence and prayers – in all of those things we have lived, seen and acted by faith.

Faith, then is how we live; the lens through which we see ourselves, others, and the world; the criterion by which we act and speak. Faithfulness means that no matter where we go, no matter what circumstances we face, we do so in relationship with the One who created, loves, sustains, and redeems us.

Jesus does not supersize our faith. That is not necessary. We live by faith not because we have *enough* faith but because we have faith, any faith, even mustard seed sized faith. That is all we need. Jesus believes that. So should we. Amen.