

Increase our faith

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to Luke and chapter 17 and at verse 5. And the Apostle said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto the sicumen tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea.

And it should obey you. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is giving teaching to his disciples in regard to what he calls offenses.

He said unto the disciples, It is impossible, but that offenses will come, but woe unto him through whom they come.

And the offenses that he speaks of are stumbling blocks, impediments, difficulties of one kind or another that may be placed in the path of a believer.

[1 : 27] And he is saying that it is impossible that that offenses will come. He is warning his disciples that they can expect one way or another that they will meet with difficulties, with impediments, with obstacles that will be placed in the path.

And it is clear that the impediments and the offenses are caused by other people.

For he says, Woe unto him through whom they come. And he takes such a serious view of this matter of putting difficulties, of putting obstacles in the path of a believer, that he says, that he says, that he says, that it were better for the person causing the offense, that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

Before preferable, Jesus is saying, before anybody would be the cause of offense in that way, that he should first be drowned in the sea.

And that makes it sufficiently clear how seriously the Lord is regarding the matter of causing offense, of creating an impediment or a stumbling block in the path of any believer.

[3 : 08] And then he goes on to speak about trespasses. Take heed to yourselves, if my brother trespass against thee, rebuke him, and if he repent, forgive him.

And what surprises us is that heolt me, and he is standing for it.

He says that the Lord is against the dead of secantus, but he is not against the limited lie, that we shall'mthem as cruel. forgive him. And what surprises us is that he is saying, if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him. We would have expected probably that Jesus would say, if thy brother trespass against thee, overlook it and forgive him. But he says, if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.

And I think the reason may be that it wouldn't be good for the offending brother, for the brother giving the offence, causing the injury or giving the insult. It wouldn't be good for him that the insult should be overlooked and that his attention shouldn't be drawn to it at all. It wouldn't be good for him. And so he says, if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him. But then if we are to rebuke the brother who is injuring us or insulting us, we would have to be careful that we were to give the rebuke in a correct spirit, in the spirit of humility, in the spirit of love, of concern for the spiritual well-being of the brother who was offending us or insulting us.

And how often, how often are we in that spiritual state, that when we give the rebuke, when we admonish a brother who is injuring us, that it is that brother good that we have in view and not our own self-justification. We would have to consider very carefully, before we gave the rebuke, that we were going to do it in the right spirit and not just to justify ourselves. If thy brother sin against thee, rebuke him.

[6 : 27] And if he repents, forgive him. If he comes and says, I'm sorry, I apologize, then forgiveness is to be given.

But the forgiveness is conditional upon his repentance. He will have to show that he is truly sorry for what he has done. If he repent, forgive him.

And if we ourselves are the cause of injury or offence to another brother or sister, then we are under obligation to express our regret, our sorrow.

It is our Christian duty to say that we are sorry if we have injured somebody or caused them offence. But then he says something else that surprises us. If he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him.

Now we might reckon that we were doing well to forgive the offending party on one occasion.

[8 : 04] But the Lord is saying, but the Lord is saying, it's not just once. If he offend you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back again to say, I'm sorry, then thou shalt forgive him.

You don't have the option of not forgiving him. Thou shalt forgive him. And when he mentions the number seven there, it is clear from what he teaches elsewhere, that the forgiveness is not to be limited even to seven times.

Not even to seventy times seven.

To show forgiveness to others. In the same spirit. And in the same manner. Well, we might say, if somebody came to us on seven separate occasions in one day to say, I'm sorry, we would begin to question the genuineness of the regret of that individual.

We would say, well, we would say, well, how deep is the repentance of this person? And yet the Lord is saying, if he comes seven times and say, I'm sorry, thou shalt forgive him.

[10 : 02] These are the standards that are set by the Lord for our Christian conduct. And you and I fall very far short of what the Lord is requiring here.

Now, when the disciples had listened to what the Lord had to say about forgiveness, forgiveness that was to be without any limit, they realized how far short they themselves were coming.

And they said to the Lord, increase our faith.

They begin to think that the faith that they already have is not adequate to meet the demands that the Lord is making upon them.

If this is what is required of us, they are saying, our faith will have to be increased. We need a far greater measure of faith than what we have already.

[11 : 16] Increase our faith so that we will be able to come up to the requirements that you have laid down for us here. So that it will be possible for us to forgive in this kind of way.

And I think we are to understand the Lord here, not to concede what they are requesting.

They say, increase our faith. They say, increase our faith. And he says, if ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto the sicaman tree, be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea, and it should obey you.

Jesus is saying to them, what is important is the quality of the faith that you have.

And if ye have the very least degree of the right kind of faith, and if ye have the very least degree of the right kind of faith, of the faith that is saving, then there are things possible for that faith that you have never imagined.

[12 : 31] He might say to this sicaman tree, be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea, and it should obey you.

And in view of what the Lord is saying here, then we have to come to the conclusion that faith, even in the least degree, is a very potent thing indeed.

So we may look together for a little while at two things in connection with what the Lord is saying.

First of all, we may look at the nature of faith.

And then secondly, we may think of why faith is so potent. Well, first of all then, let us consider briefly the nature of faith.

Well, we have been taught out of the Shorter Catechism that faith is a saving grace.

[13 : 39] And grace is something that we receive from the Lord. It is a favour, it is a gift, granted to us, although we are undeserving, granted to us by the Lord.

Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation.

Faith is a saving grace. Faith is a saving grace.

So faith is the gift of God to his own children. Something that is of divine origin.

It has come down from God to each of God's own children. And we may say that faith is a divinely given capacity to respond to God himself and to his word.

It is a responsiveness or a receptiveness to the Lord. And that is certainly what is true of all who have true faith, saving faith.

[14 : 54] That they have a responsiveness, that they have a receptiveness to the Lord himself and to his truth. And it is true faith that his people receive himself and the other blessings and graces that he is bestowing upon them.

Now something that faith does in the experience of the person who has it is to focus the attention of that person upon the Lord.

See it is not so much that it focuses attention upon ourselves, but that it focuses attention upon the Lord. We are given an awareness of the Lord in his greatness and glory and majesty and graciousness and mercifulness and compassion and the other qualities that belong to him.

We are given an awareness of the Lord through faith. And our attention is focused upon the Lord in that way.

Not so much that attention is focused upon ourselves and what we are able to achieve through having a certain outlook or a certain state of mind.

[16 : 23] But that our attention is focused upon the Lord and upon what he is able to do.

Our attention is focused upon the Lord and upon his sufficiency, upon his majesty, upon his grace that is suited to our need and is able to supply all our need.

And the question of deserving, of worthiness, of worthiness doesn't come into it at all. It doesn't come into the reckoning at all. Because we understand that it is a matter of grace.

It is a matter of favour from the Lord to the undeserving. That his grace is available freely.

Not that we are able to earn it or to purchase it, but that his grace is available freely. And that faith is to reach out its hand to receive from God the grace that he freely bestows.

[17 : 35] And that faith is to reach out to us. We are given a very encouraging picture of the Lord in one of the books of Chronicles.

The book of Chronicles, where we are told that the eyes of the Lord go to and fro throughout the earth. To show himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are perfect towards him.

And the hearts that are perfect towards him. And the hearts that are perfect towards him are hearts that are open to him. Open to his direction.

Open to his instruction. Open to his own attention. He is ready. He is ready to show himself strong on behalf of those who have faith in him.

Who are responsive to him. Who are receptive to his blessing and to his grace. Now, in our day, and before our day also, this was true, in our day there is quite a lot of confusion in the minds of people as to what faith actually is.

[19 : 01] Some people imagine that faith is saying to myself over and over again that a certain thing is true or that a certain thing is going to happen until at last I have convinced myself and I come to believe it.

That is some people's idea of faith, that it is something that they themselves achieve by having a certain state of mind, by having a certain outlook, saying to themselves over and over again until at last they convince themselves.

And there are other people and their idea of faith is something like this. They are really refusing to face up to reality by believing that for them everything is going to be alright, even although they have no grounds for believing that everything is going to be alright.

And those of us who are involved in the work of the ministry as we visit people in their own homes, we discover that certain people will tell us that they have faith.

Some of them will tell us that they have great faith. And yet when we begin to probe and to discover what kind of faith it is, we realise that it is not faith in Jesus Christ.

[20 : 56] It is rather confidence in themselves, confidence in a certain attitude and outlook that they themselves have.

It is a state of mind that they have induced or created within themselves. It is not at all a gift of God. It is something that they themselves have constructed. And it certainly brings no honour at all to God. It is dishonouring to God.

Because they imagine that they can use this thing that they call faith in order to gain certain favour from the hand of God.

It is a faith in which they boast. And it is only a delusion. And it would be a great mercy if they were to be delivered from this delusion.

[22 : 07] And if they were to be shown that faith is not at all what they imagine it to be. That faith amounts to putting no confidence at all in anything of our own.

In any outlook, in any point of view, in any attitude of our own. That faith is a matter of resting upon Jesus Christ and his finished work.

And putting no confidence at all in anything that we ourselves can devise. And something that is true of those who have the faith that is saving.

Something that is true of them. Is that the word of the Lord is important in their lives. That the word of the Lord is meaningful for them.

That they are ready to listen to the word of the Lord. That they have an ear to hear it. That they have a heart to receive it. That they want to apply it to themselves.

[23 : 14] That they want to live their lives in the light of the teaching of the word of God. That is true of these people who have the faith that is saving.

The word of God is very precious and very important in their lives.

Well then we have looked briefly at what faith is and indeed what faith is not. And we can go on now to think of how faith is so potent.

In terms of what the Lord is saying here. If he had faith as a grain of mustard seed. He might say unto the Sigmund tree, Be thou plucked up by the root and be thou planted in the sea and it should obey you.

Well why, how is faith so potent? It is because it links the sufficiency of God with our weakness and our inadequacy.

[24 : 28] And it is wonderful to think of that. It is wonderful to think that God links his own omnipotence, his own greatness, his own all sufficiency.

That he links himself with individuals who are totally weak and frail and unworthy and inadequate.

There is a link, there is the link of faith between this weak, insufficient individual and the God who is all gracious and all powerful.

That is what makes faith such a potent thing in the experience of a believer. Now where there is not faith and where people may be of a religious outlook.

They imagine that they can achieve certain results through their own sufficiency.

[25 : 38] Through a dependence upon themselves and things that they themselves are able to do. That you will remember was what was true of the Pharisees and these people in the time of our Lord.

They were very confident in their own goodness, in their own righteousness, in their own merit, in their own sufficiency.

And they were so confident in themselves and in their own goodness. That they imagined that they were serving God when they were rejecting his son from heaven.

When they were harassing and persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are told about one outstanding Pharisee in the New Testament.

Saul of Tarsus. Who thought that he should do many things contrary to Jesus of Nazareth. Ah, he was trusting.

[26 : 56] He was trusting. He was trusting in his own goodness. In his own merit. In his own righteousness. In his own strength. And according to his own light.

He thought that he was doing the will of God. When he was harassing and persecuting the Christians. He was trusting in the Lord. He was trusting in the Lord. In his own righteousness. But when the link of faith came to be formed.

Between himself and the Lord. All his strength became weakness. He realised that he was nothing at all.

And that nothing of his own counted for anything. He became weak then. In his own sufficiency.

He became weak. In his own strength. In his own righteousness. In his own wisdom. And it was at the point. Where the link of faith was formed.

[27 : 59] Between himself and the Lord. That he began to pray. Ah yes, he had prayed before then. And I'm sure if we had heard Saul of Tarsus praying.

It would have been some prayer. It would have been very impressive. From different points of view. No doubt it was very eloquent. Very well put together.

But in the estimation of the Lord. He didn't begin to pray. Until the Lord himself met him.

On the Damascus road. And then. And then. Ah then. He really began to pray. And after that. He began to say.

I can do all things. Through Christ. Who strengthens me. It wasn't any longer. I can do all things. [28 : 58] In my own strength. In my own sufficiency. In my own goodness. I can do all things. Through Christ. Who strengthens me. Now what Jesus.

Is saying. To his disciples here. Is something like this. You think. That. Great things. Are not possible. For the faith. That you already have. You think. That you need. A great. Increase. In your faith. Instantly. Before. You can achieve. Anything significant. In my service. But I am telling you. That the faith. That you already have. The faith. That is the gift. Of God. That you have. That you have. You think. That you need. A great. Increase. In your faith. Instantly. Before. You can achieve.

[29 : 59] Anything significant. In my service. The faith. That is the gift. Of God. The faith. That is saving. The faith. That is a saving grace.

Is of such a nature. That through it. You are able to achieve. Things that you could never imagine. And that is the purpose.

Of using. This illustration. Of the Sikamon tree. Of the black. Of the black. Mulberry tree. Which it is thought to be. Now he wasn't saying to them.

That by the exercise. Of their faith. They could literally. Transplant. Or uproot. A Sikamon tree. And plant it in the sea. And that it. That it should obey them. But he is. Saying to them. Through this illustration. That things. That are equally.

[31 : 02] That things. That are equally. Unimaginable. Can be achieved. Through the faith. That is saving. Wherever that faith. Is present.

In the least degree. Even if it is as little. As a grain. Of mustard seed. It. It is. That we are told. That there was something. Something rather unique. About the Sikamon tree. Or the black mulberry tree. That is. That it was. So well.

So firmly. Rooted in the soil. That if you cut it down. Its roots. Would remain in the soil. For 600 years.

and it would appear that the Lord chose this illustration specially because it was inconceivable that a tree that was so well rooted as the mulberry tree could be plucked up by the roots and planted in the sea.

[32 : 11] He chose his illustration particularly to make the point that this was something that nobody could possibly imagine happening.

The tree was so well rooted in the earth. And so he is saying to the disciples, all things are possible to him that believe us.

All things are possible to the faith that is saving because the almighty power of God, the all-sufficiency of God, is available to that faith that God himself has given as a gift to his own people.

But then we are to consider how this relates to ourselves. What practical bearing does this have upon our experience, upon our life here in this earth?

Well, I think it is a bearing upon us in this way. That if there is anything that we are commanded to do or required to do by the word of God, however difficult that thing may appear to ourselves, however unattainable or impossible that thing may appear to us, if it is something that we are commanded to do or required to do by the word of God, then we are to reckon that through faith it is indeed possible.

[34 : 03] God is able to remove the most formidable obstacles that may lie in our path in order that whatever it is we are commanded to do may become achievable or possible for us.

Now all God's people are given faith. And they are given that faith to use it, to exercise it.

They are not given this faith so that it may lie dormant and that it may not be exercised at all. They are given the faith in order that they may use it, that they may exercise it.

Now as far as the disciples were concerned, when they said to the Lord, increase our faith, what was in their mind was that when they prayed to the Lord, that the Lord would suddenly give them a great increase of faith in answer to prayer.

And that as a result of that great increase of faith, then they would be able to do the things that he required them to do.

[35 : 38] But really, they were trying to take a shortcut. They were trying to short circuit the whole process.

You see, that is not the way in which faith is increased. Faith is not increased merely in answer to prayers and requests that we make to the Lord.

If our faith is increased, it can only be increased by using and exercising the faith that we already have.

However tiny, however little, however insignificant, the faith that we have may appear to ourselves, we have been given that faith in order that we may exercise it, that we may use it.

And as we do so, as we do so, it will be increased. Now we know how it is that we believe that children and young people growing up, they need healthy exercise for the development of their limbs, of their muscles, of their bodies.

[37 : 08] And if you have a child that doesn't get or take sufficient exercise, then that is very unhealthy. The body of that child cannot possibly develop in the right kind of way.

And it is like that with faith. If our faith is to increase, if it is to grow, it can only grow as it is being used, as it is being exercised.

And the way that faith is to grow is as it struggles, as it strives, as it engages in conflict, as it grapples with difficulties day by day.

That is the way in which our faith is going to be increased, is going to be strengthened. Now we might imagine that the best way in which our faith might develop and increase would be if life was smooth for us, if we had a prosperous kush, if there were no ripples on our sea at all.

But that is not how it is in reality. It is when people have to grapple with difficulties in the spiritual life.

[38 : 33] It is as they engage in spiritual conflict, as they launch out in obedience to the will of God and face up to whatever difficulties may confront them.

It is through that process that their faith is going to be developed and made strong and going to be increased. If he had faith as a grain of mustard seed, he might say unto the sicumen tree, well, is there a great sicumen tree in your own path today?

Is there some great obstacle some great difficulty that you see before you? Or perhaps it is something that is not actually so great at all, but you are magnifying it into something that is terribly difficult, if not impossible.

If he had faith as a grain of mustard seed, he might say unto the sicumen tree, be thou removed and planted in the midst of the sea and it should obey you.

Faith is potent because it draws its resources from the Lord. It clings to the Lord.

[40 : 07] It looks to the Lord. It appeals to the Lord. It depends upon the Lord. There is the danger that we may be looking too much to our own resources when we ought to be looking away from ourselves and to be looking up to the Lord and to the resources that he is able to give us.

He is able to supply all our need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus. And this is the outlook that we are to have in relation to every duty that the Lord is laying upon us.

As we go through life, we meet people who are genuine believers and they are confronted by certain demands that the Lord is making upon them.

And they say, ah, this is too difficult for me. This is something that I cannot do. I'm not able to do this thing. And they are really impoverishing themselves because they are not being obedient to the will of the Lord and they are not exercising.

the faith that is already there, the faith that is the gift of God to his own children. Well, may the Lord enable us to exercise the faith that he has given if he has given us that faith.

[41 : 49] May he add his blessing. Let us pray. We pray, oh Lord, that we may recognize that faith is thy gift to thy children.

Thou, by the grace of thy Holy Spirit, hast generated faith within them and thou hast enabled them to look up to thee. Thou hast made them dependent upon thee.

And we thank thee that we have the testimony of the Lord himself that faith in the least degree is able to achieve great things and the experience of thy people.

And we pray that through thy grace, through the teaching of thy Spirit and of thy word, we may be obedient to thy will. Bless to us thy word and graciously forgive our sin for Christ's sake.

Amen. We shall sing in Psalm 89 and at verse 15.

[43 : 01] Psalm 89 and at verse 15. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.