

Faith Like a Mustard Seed

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[0 : 0 0] begin by asking, has anyone asked a rather embarrassing question in maybe a public setting that you wish you hadn't? When I was in uni, Rachel and I, we actually studied abroad in the UK for part of a semester, it was in the UK for part of it was on the continent. We were studying politics and economics of the European Union. And so we came with our own school, we had our own group of students, we had our own professors, so we weren't in a classroom. Most of our days were spent traveling around, meeting with different government leaders, officials, government entities, organizations. And I remember one time we were in Brussels and I don't remember where we were, who we were meeting or what we were talking about. But something that stands out was we had this government official who was speaking to us and after he was done we had the opportunity to ask questions. And there was someone in our group who raised his hand to ask a question, what he thought was an intelligent, insightful question. And it was met by silence from this official. And to kind of break the awkwardness, my classmate just said, I'm sorry if that's a dumb question. And the official responded, he said, there's no such thing as a dumb question, only dumb people. And we all just kind of like gasped, we kind of looked at each other like, who is this guy saying this to us? But we see in our passage today the disciples making a request that they think is an intelligent, a heartfelt request of the

Lord that they probably did with the best of intentions. Yet what it does, it exposes the fact that they had a flawed understanding. We see in this passage this collection of Jesus' teachings. And though they're collected together, this doesn't mean that they happened at the same time. Luke collects them in such a way that they are organized, that show Jesus giving a warning and an instruction and a parable. And it's held together by this exhortation in verse 5 and 6, which is prompted by the disciples making this request of Jesus. A request that sounds like a good request to us, right? Lord, increase our faith. Now Jesus doesn't respond like that official and say, that's a dumb question. But he does point out the fact that this is a bad question, or rather the disciples are thinking in an incorrect manner about the nature of faith itself. And so that's what I really want us to focus on today, is really hone in on verses 5 and 6 to consider this understanding of the Christian faith. And so specifically three aspects of faith that I want us to look at today is, one, the function of our faith, to the object of our faith, and thirdly, the effect of our faith.

The function, the object, and the effect of our faith. And so let's begin by thinking about the function of our faith. And I want to do this in a very foundational manner, because I don't want to take for granted the fact that there may be some here that aren't believers. I think in recent months, we've had a number of new people in our midst who might not have a Christian background, who are exploring the claims of Jesus, who are genuinely interested in the gospel. And I want Beclu to be a place where you can explore. I want Beclu to be a place where you hear the gospel preached with clarity and accuracy. So I think this is foundational for us to understand what faith truly is. And I think there's some of us here who've been Christians for a really long time, but yet maybe we still struggle with our faith. Maybe we're embarrassed by the fact that our faith is weak. And so I hope this can be an encouragement to us as well. And so when we think about faith, from a cultural or a societal standpoint, there's many different meanings, there's many different opinions of faith that we see in the world around us. There's some that think of faith as really an outdated concept, that faith is simply for the weak or the simple-minded. There's the late atheist writer Christopher Hitchens. He wrote that faith is a surrender of the mind. It's the surrender of reason. And so for people like him, faith really has no value at all. It's foolish. It's old-fashioned. It has no place in our current society. But then there's other people in our culture that say, they look at faith and say, hey, this is a virtue. Faith is something that encourages us. It motivates us. So our kids, their primary school, they have this motto. The motto of the school is to believe, achieve.

But the fact is, the school says nothing about what to believe in. It doesn't say, are you supposed to believe in yourself? Are you supposed to believe in your teachers? Are you supposed to believe in your classmates? For many, it doesn't really matter what you believe in so long as you just have faith.

And for these people in our society, when they look at faith, they've really just turned it more into superstition. Because it's just about believing hard enough in something, maintaining a positive outlook, and then positive things will happen. But what we see, whether this viewpoint is rejecting faith as being anti-reason or holding on to faith as a virtue in and of itself, we see that the Bible says something very differently about what faith truly is. If we look in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 1, it says, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see.

[5 : 30] So the reformer John Calvin from 500 years ago, he expounds more on this definition of what faith is. He says, faith as is the firm and certain knowledge of God's goodwill to us, which being founded on the free promise given in Jesus Christ, is revealed in our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

And so we see in this definition, we see the work of the Trinity at play here, right? Calvin mentions the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's the Father who extends his goodwill to you. And this is given to us in Jesus. It is sealed in our hearts with the Holy Spirit. And so that brings us back to our question, well, what is the function of faith?

What does this firm and certain knowledge of God's goodness do for us? And so to answer the question, it may be helpful to kind of be thinking about the Reformation a little longer, to kind of recognize that 500 years ago, this was a very hot topic of debate.

How are you saved? How are we justified before God? How do we receive God's grace? How do we obtain Jesus's righteousness? Medieval theology taught that our justification before God, our acceptance before God was an ongoing process. And so with some time and effort, God may eventually view us as righteous.

[6 : 57] And so when we work, we work to please God. And when we do so, we will gradually earn this infusion of God's grace. If you think about a teacup, right? And you have hot water in the teacup and you put your teabag in the teacup. You look at slowly that tea infuses the water. That's kind of the concept that was at play back in the day that if we work hard enough, God will gradually give us his grace and we will be made righteous. It's kind of the old adage, if you do your best, God will do the rest. The problem is, is that's not the gospel. The Bible clearly says that we are dead in our sins and that our good deeds are like filthy rags.

And so we don't come to God just seeking healing. We don't come like a sick person in the hospital who needs a blood transfusion as though we just need an infusion of grace. We are dead. We are without life. We need new life. We need resurrection. And the fact of the matter is, is a dead man can't make himself alive. It is God who must initiate this action within us. And so truth, faith, it comes through recognizing that we can't save ourselves. Faith doesn't just look inwards at ourselves and our own emotion.

It looks outward and focuses on Jesus. It focuses on the gospel. Because this is the good news that Jesus sent his son to earth, who lived a perfect life, who perfectly fulfilled the law in its entirety, who paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, who took our sin and gave us his righteousness, that receiving this free gift through faith, we may have eternal life. And so this righteousness that we're talking about here, it's not a righteousness that's earned. It's not a righteousness that we gradually develop.

It's a righteousness of Jesus that's credited to us by God and received by faith. And this happens before we ever take a single step toward righteousness on our own. And so we see that faith is solely the work of Jesus. Faith is our good works play no part in our salvation. And I heard it described this way before that, even if we thought that our salvation was based 0.0001% on our good works, those good works would still be 100% of our confidence. Because we would always be asking the question, have I done enough? So if we think of another reformer, Martin Luther, when he was 21, he thought the Lord was calling him to become a monk. And so he wrote in his journals, he said, I was a good monk. And I kept my rules so strictly that I could say that if ever a monk could get into heaven through monastic discipline, I was that monk. But yet as he strove to be accepted by God, the really the further he felt like he was from that goal. His piety didn't bring really any sort of satisfaction or security to him. So it really wasn't until he was going through the book of

Romans that he had at this light bulb moment. He comes to Romans chapter 1 verse 17 that says this. It says, for in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. And so it was at this moment that Luther realized that faith is the only way to please God. That faith is our only way that we may ever be declared righteous. And so this is just what we talked about in, or what we read earlier in Genesis 15 from the Old Testament. When God comes to this man named Abram, and he makes this covenant promise with him, and he promises to bless him that he will have a son, that his family will number the stars. And he doesn't offer this blessing to him because Abraham was deserving of it.

[11 : 14] And we recognize how Abram received this promise. It said, Abraham believed the promise of God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. So it wasn't Abraham that was, he wasn't righteous because of what he did. He was righteous because he believed. And some may argue then, well, when you think about faith, it is some element of action, right? It is some responsibility on our part, right? We are acting in some way when we believe. I think the best way to think of it is how the reformers thought of it.

To recognize that faith is an open hand. Faith is an instrument by which we grab and take hold of the righteousness of God. And so it's the image of a beggar that's sitting on a street corner, and a rich man passes by, and he extends his hand to this rich man, and the rich man gives him money. It's not his hand that was deserving of anything, but is the instrument by which he receives this money from the rich man. This is the function of our faith. It's only by faith that we receive God's gift of grace, that our sins are pardoned, that Christ's righteousness becomes our own. And so that's the foundation with which we much understand what the Christian faith is. So what we can turn to now is that second point, the object of our faith. If we turn back to our passage, the disciples ask this question, or they make this request, increase our faith. And like we said, this sounds like a good request, right? It's something that we, probably many of us have prayed or asked for or thought before, increase our faith. Especially when they understand that faith is a necessary thing, that it's a good thing. Well, if some is good, more is better, right?

But it's interesting Jesus' response, maybe even surprising to us, because he doesn't grant the disciples' request. He says in verse 6, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea and it will obey you.

So we see here that Jesus is saying that faith isn't a matter of quantity, but of presence. It's not a matter of how much faith you have, but who your faith is in.

[13 : 37] And he gives us this picture of this mustard seed, what is known as one of these, the smallest of the seeds. As you describe this, this tiny amount of faith that his disciples or others may have.

He's saying that even if you have this little amount of faith, you can accomplish great things. This mulberry tree can be uprooted and planted into the sea. And certainly here we recognize that Jesus is using metaphor. This might have been language that would have been common within Jewish literature at the time. But we see this mulberry tree likely would have been a tree with this massive root system, a tree that could have lived over 500 years old. And so this imagery of just plucking up this tree and replanting it in the sea, it strikes us as impossible, right? Jesus is using this as hyperbole. He uses similar language elsewhere in the Gospels. If we looked at Matthew 17, Jesus is having a very similar discussion with his disciples. And he says to them, truly I tell you, if your faith, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say this mountain move from here to there and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

And so we see that faith can do amazing things because of who the object of our faith is. This all-powerful God whom we serve. This is a God that we sing about in the Psalms as being our refuge, as being having control over the mountains and the seas.

This is who Job speaks about in Job 9, saying God is so powerful, he can move and overturn mountains. He shakes the earth and makes the pillars tremble. And so our faith is powerful because our God is powerful. Charles Spurgeon, who is a minister, English minister in the 1800s, he said, it's not the strength of our faith that saves you, but the strength of him on whom you rely. And so when we think about faith, it should never be something that we turn into needing a quantitative value.

The second that we begin focusing on how much faith we have, the object of our faith or the focus of our faith turns from God back to ourselves. Because when we're concerned about our amount of faith, it becomes nothing more than just self-reflection, a practice of self-confidence.

[16:03] Think about what the culture says about faith again, right? There's part of the culture that thinks faith is a virtue. You've just got to believe. But what does culture say to believe in?

Most people say to believe in self. Believe in faith, just have more faith. But instead of that faith being something that frees us, that faith ultimately turns into a burden. The question is, do I have enough faith? Do I believe in myself enough? Is my faith strong enough?

You see, faith in and of itself really isn't a virtue at all. It only becomes virtuous when it's placed in something worthy of belief. And so then it's worth considering how Jesus addresses this topic of faith elsewhere in the Gospels. We see over and over again Jesus in his teaching, in his performing miracles. He tells people to have faith. He tells people to believe. Those who have no faith, he instructs them to have faith. If we think of Mark 5, we have this ruler of the synagogue who comes to Jesus and he has this sick daughter and he asks Jesus to come and heal his daughter. But as Jesus is walking with this ruler to his home, others show up and say, hey look, forget about it, she's already dead.

How did Jesus respond? He looks to the ruler and says, do not fear, only believe. And he goes to this ruler's house and he raises this little girl from the dead. See, Jesus wants us to have faith. But it's worth noting for as many times as Jesus says believe or have faith, he never commands have more faith.

Think of the story where Jesus calms the sea in Matthew 8. He and his disciples get on the boat. They're going across the sea. Jesus falls asleep in the boat. When this big storm whips up, waves are coming over the edge of the boat. The disciples think they're going to die. And they call out to Jesus, Lord, save us. We're going to drown. What's Jesus's response? Why are you afraid, oh you, of little faith? Then he rebukes the winds and the seas and there's a great calm. So it's not that Jesus doesn't recognize the weakness of his disciples' faith. But his disciples' faith isn't, Jesus' action isn't conditioned on the amount of their faith. He doesn't demand them and say, hey look, only when you start believing in me more am I going to start acting and I'll calm these waves. No, he acts. He asserts his power and authority. And by doing so, the faith of the disciples increases. And so we see this pattern over and over again in the gospel. People who see Jesus perform miracles, who hear Jesus' teaching, and it says they believe in his name. It's maybe a silly analogy, but think about you came in here this morning and you just, you couldn't sit down in your chair. You didn't have faith in your chair.

[19:06] You didn't trust your chair that it was going to hold your weight. What would be the best way for me to convince you to sit in that chair? I don't think it would be if I just came up to you and say, hey look, just have more faith. Just trust the chair and sit down. Because if I were to do that, I would be focusing on your own emotion, right? I would be focusing on your own idea of your own faith. It would be much better, a much better way for you to increase your faith is if I turn your focus to the chair itself, right? I say, look, I'll sit down in the chair for you. Look, this chair holds my weight. Or if I tell you of all the people that have sat in the chair before you, if I hold up the warranty of the chair and say, look, this chair is not even a year old.

If I point out the metal that's used and the welding that holds it together to give it its structure, that's how you'd increase your faith to finally sit down. And I think the same is true for us here. We're all commanded to have faith, but the command is not simply to have more faith because the quality of our faith is not a condition of our salvation. And so should we want to have more or stronger faith? Yes. Yes, we should. But our faith is not strengthened by focusing on the faith.

Our faith is strengthened by focusing on the object of our faith. The object of our faith being Jesus. Remembering who he is. Remembering what he has done. Being focused on his resume.

In John 2, Jesus talks to the religious leaders and he's talking about destroying the temple. He says, I will destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it again. And the religious leaders think he's crazy, right? What is he talking about that he's going to destroy the temple and build it back? And it's interesting that one of the only times that John, the author of this gospel, kind of inserts his own little commentary or insight, he makes a point and says that Jesus is actually talking about the temple of his body. And he says that when Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he said and they believed the scriptures and the word that Jesus had spoken. And so we see that their faith increased because they listened and understood the truth of his words and they witnessed the power of his action. And so for some of us today, maybe you're not a believer and maybe this is all new to you and you're wondering, could I ever possibly have the faith needed to be a Christian? The message is not try harder. The message is not feel more deeply.

The message is not conjure up enough faith within you. The message is look to Jesus and receive this free gift of grace.

[21 : 56] Maybe there's some here who have been around the church for a while, but maybe you're discouraged or maybe even embarrassed by the weakness of your faith. You think you should be further along in your faith journey by now. The message for you this morning is to look to Jesus. The promises of life are for you.

Maybe there's some here who've been Christians for a very long time and maybe you've been struggling with your faith and you're questioning whether I can keep up at this task. Do I have enough faith to continue? The message for you this morning is to look to Jesus for it is the presence and support of his spirit that keeps us from sinking into utter despair. As it says in Hebrews 12, it is Jesus who is the founder and the perfecter of our faith. And so we don't need to worry about the quantity or the quality of our faith, but to focus on the object of our faith because when we do, when we focus on Christ, our faith will be increased. Remember, as the reformers said, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And so this brings us to our third point then, the effect of faith. So if we think about the Reformation one more time, the Catholic Church had real problems with this idea of being justified through faith alone. Because the fear was that if man is justified only by receiving God's gift through faith, then we'd really have no motivation to do good works, right?

I mean, we'd be saved and we can just be as lawless and corrupt as we'd want to be. So having assurance in their mind was really the epitome of pride. How can you possibly have assurance in your faith? You must keep up your effort in order to ensure that God will give you this infusion of grace that you may be viewed as righteous. The reformers taught and what we believe today is much different. The fact that we can have assurance of faith because it's solely based on the works of Jesus. And so while our good works, they play no role in our justification or our salvation, they play a significant role when we think about our sanctification. Meaning this, that we're not saved by works, but we are saved to do good works. Paul poses this question in Romans 6.

He says, shall we go on sinning so that grace may abound? By no means. We are those who have died to sin. How can we live to it any longer? We have been buried with Christ in baptism. We're raised to walk in newness of life. And so faith, it does not, shouldn't diminish our desire to do good works.

In fact, it should motivate us to good works. Because if we've been given the righteousness of Christ, it should be our desire to follow after Christ, to live as Christ lived.

[24 : 59] Think about the teachings in this passage here. I think this gives some explanation as to why Luke might have put these verses together, these sayings of Jesus together, and why he centers it on this idea of faith. Because we look back in verse 1, is what it says, things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves.

This is some serious language. Jesus is expressing this extreme seriousness of responsibility as Christians, not only to guard ourselves from sin, but also to make sure that we guard others from sin too, that we don't tear others down. In verse 4, he continues, if your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them. And if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, and seven times come back to you saying, I repent, you must forgive them. Again, Jesus is highlighting here the difficulty of Christian community, that we're called to correct and rebuke one another, that we're called to forgive one another, even when people continually sin against us.

We need to have this wholehearted willingness to forgive. If we jump to verse 7, there's this parable that really emphasizes what we've been talking about, that good works don't earn us anything, that we serve the Lord out of a sense of duty, that when we follow his will, we don't do so with a sense of entitlement at all, but with a sense of humility. Because of what Christ has done for us, we owe him our total loyalty. And so if you combine all these thoughts and instructions and parables together about thinking that we have to be, look out for sin, help others stay away from sin, to forgive, to rebuke, to be servants. The disciples hear these teachings, and it's not unreasonable to think, if I'm expected to do all these things, I'm going to need some more faith. It's kind of like if you volunteer for something, and it ends up being a lot more time and effort than you ever thought it to be. For those who helped with the demolition of this room before it was renovated, you thought you may show up for a couple hours, and three days later we're still working at it. Again, Jesus is pointing out

that what's needed here is not an increase in our faith, but an active exercise of our faith. Through faith we recognize the power of Christ and his kingdom. And so as citizens of his kingdom, we participate in his rule and reign. This is what Peter speaks of in 1 Peter chapter 4.

He says, when we speak, we speak the words of God. When we serve, we serve through God's power. When we suffer, we suffer with Christ. And so there's nothing that we do as Christians that we do apart from the power of God. We aren't saved by grace through faith in order that we have to go out on our own effort and live for God and try to hold fast to the sanctification on our own.

And our faith, it not only justifies us, but it also empowers us. That's what Jesus is, the point Jesus is making here. Because just like we're given Jesus' righteousness, we're also given Jesus' Spirit.

[28 : 23] And it's the Holy Spirit who brings us to faith in the first place. And it's the Holy Spirit who remains within God's people to bring about this inward renewal, enabling us to serve him with a heart of gratitude for all Christ has done for us. And so this is the ultimate effect of our faith.

That it may transform our lives to pursue righteousness. That it gives us a heart that's eager to love and to serve not only our little Christian community here, but the world around us.

A faith that affects us in such a way that it gives us the passion to see the establishment of Christ's eternal kingdom. And so that, may that be our prayer today, that we may have the faith of a mustard seed.

Not resting on our own ability. Not resting on our own efforts. Not focused simply on the amount of faith we have, but focused on the object of our faith. Who is Christ?

Christ. For it is Christ who declares us righteous. And it is Christ who enables us to pursue righteousness. And so this is the faith that's available to us all. May we receive it with outstretched hands.

[29 : 40] For it is yours in Christ. Let's pray. Amen.