

How Much Faith Do We Need?

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[0 : 00] Before we turn to God's words, let's turn to God again briefly in prayer. Our Father God, we are so grateful to you for showing yourself to us, for calling us in to see and to taste your glory, to know your goodness.

We thank you that we know that goodness in the Gospel, that we know what it means to be forgiven, to be redeemed, to be set free. And Lord, we pray that we would also know this morning what it means to be instructed by your words, to be led in your counsel.

And we pray that this morning you would help us to not be like horses or mules, as we've just been singing, that constantly have to be prodded and given forced direction.

We pray that out of gratitude for what you've done for us in Jesus Christ, that we would be willing, that we would have a firm desire to do what your word tells us to do.

So Lord, please motivate us by your grace this morning. Lord, some of us come with huge doubts. Some of us come this morning not believing at all or barely believing.

[1 : 14] And we pray that your word would wrestle with us and that it would convince us where we are like that. Lord, many of us come knowing with the conviction that your word is true and yet we find it such a struggle to put it into practice in our lives.

So again Lord, we pray that your word would challenge us and that your Holy Spirit would help us to be doers of your word. Lord, some of us come with great trouble and with sorrow, with worries and with stress in our lives.

For those of us in that situation, we pray that your word would give us relief and that it would give us comfort and that your grace would be something that will give us rest this morning.

So Lord, whatever situation we bring ourselves in, we thank you that you understand. We thank you that you're compassionate and gracious. And we thank you that your word is there for us all.

So Lord, please speak to us. Please bless us and help us to understand it. And we pray for this in your Son's name. Amen. This month in September, we're doing a series of sermons on faith.

[2 : 27] As a church, the whole concept of faith is hugely important to us. Collectively, we are a church in the Christian faith. Individually, because we're here this morning, we're either people who have some degree of faith or who are at least interested in it, interested enough to be here.

Those of us who believe the Gospel, believe that we're accepted by God on the basis of faith in Christ alone. So faith is a big issue for us.

And it's also a major theme in our culture. Our former president, not our former president, that's an American slip, but it's not our former prime minister. I can't even get our politics right.

Our former prime minister, Tony Blair, since he stopped that work, now devotes himself to global faith initiatives. On the other hand, we have someone like Richard Dawkins spreading the message that there is, quote, nothing good whatsoever in the idea of faith.

Faith is something we need to ditch and move on from. At an individual level, we have a society where people who go through difficult times speak about how their faith got them through.

[3 : 39] And yet for many of us, even if we think and speak like that, our concept of faith is empty, it's nebulous, it's vacuous. What does it really mean? I don't know.

So throughout September, we're looking at faith in the Bible, looking at how the Bible defines faith and what it teaches us on the basis of that. This morning, we're looking at the first few verses here in Luke 17, where Jesus teaches his disciples about faith.

And what I'd like us to see at the very beginning is that in context, the disciples have just seen the absolute necessity of faith, of personal saving faith in Jesus Christ.

You can see that from chapter 16, the chapter before, which we're not going to read, but we'll skim through it. At the very beginning, we have the story of a man, and we're not sure how much faith he

has.

On the sermon notes that you've been given, there's a typo there that's my fault. It should be the faithless man question mark, because Jesus tells the story of a man who seems a bit of a dubious character.

[4 : 44] He's a bit shrewd, a bit crafty, ducking and diving. He's a man who knows he's about to become redundant. He works as the manager on behalf of a rich man.

He realizes because he's about to lose his job, he's got no other job prospects, he's not a physical kind of guy who can do manual labour, he's too proud to beg.

So he acts shrewdly. He knows he's about to lose everything anyway, so he goes around the people that he represents his manager to, and says, do you owe him 800? I'll tell you what, we'll just change it and make it four.

Do you owe him 500? We'll just cut that in half. And Jesus uses that story to teach us that one day we will all lose everything. One day we will all die, where we'll have to leave everything behind.

So while we're on earth, he gives this teaching to use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that when it's gone you may be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

[5 : 43] Okay, there's a stark reminder that we will not be here forever, and that should have an impact on how we use our possessions. Then he tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Another story about another rich man, a man who lives a luxurious life, fine wine, beautiful clothes, huge house.

Every day this man passes a beggar who sits at the gate of his house. The beggar is called Lazarus. Medically Lazarus is in a mess. His skin is covered in sores, dogs come and lick them, it's a horrible picture.

As it transpires, both of these men die, the rich man and Lazarus. But at this point there's a complete about turn in their fortunes, because the rich man goes to hell, and Lazarus ends up in heaven, where he's beside Abraham, the Old Testament hero of the faith, whereas in hell the rich man suffers and he thirsts.

And he wants Lazarus to come and give him a drink of water to alleviate his thirst. But while he's there, Abraham tells him it doesn't work like that.

There's a great chasm that's fixed between where you are and where we are. Where you are now, you'll be there forever. And it's an alarming, terrifying story.

[7 : 02] And its dark reality is immediately brought into the disciples' own world at the beginning of chapter 17, when Jesus tells them about the realities of temptation and sin.

He speaks about sin's inevitability. Sin will come, it's all around us in the world, and woe to the person who brings it. Woe to the person who spreads sin rather than grace.

Jesus says it would be better for that person if he was never born. So these are stark, terrifying realities. Jesus leaves the people listening to him in no doubt of the absolute necessity of personal saving faith.

The stakes are the highest they could possibly be. Life and death, eternity, heaven and hell. So it's not surprising to see their immediate response.

I've got three points this morning. The first is the disciples' response, which is increase our faith.

That's in verse 5. The Apostle said to the Lord, increase our faith. This is a response that focuses on how much faith we have, quantity of faith.

[8 : 14] And at one level, this is an understandable logical response. If our faith is the thing that makes the difference between an eternity in heaven or in hell, and if we really do live in the world that Jesus has just described, where things that cause people to sin are bound to come, if that is true, surely we want to have as much faith as we possibly can, don't we?

I'll try and illustrate this mentality. A lot of you are students, so you don't even have to imagine this because you live in this world. But for those of you who aren't, imagine you're a student and you have a big final exam coming up.

An exam you only have one chance to do. Your future depends on whether you pass it. It's the difference between failing and passing your degree. The difference between getting the job that you've been conditionally accepted for and not having a job.

So months in advance, you throw yourself into your work, you bury yourself in books, you live in the library. And the goal in all of this is to do as well as you possibly can by doing as much as you possibly can beforehand.

Take that mentality, which is so logical and normal to us, and apply it to this situation in Luke 17, where the disciples have just been told about the enormous, eternal, unchangeable consequence of their response to Jesus.

[9 : 41] And their first response to that is, well, we need more faith. So they say to Jesus, increase our faith. Help us to have every chance of being, to use Jesus' words from the previous chapter, welcomed into eternal dwellings.

But there's a big problem with that whole mentality, and Jesus picks up on it immediately. And we see that as we, in a moment, as we look at his response.

The problem is that an enormous amount of faith, an infinite amount of faith even, in the wrong thing is useless. It accomplishes nothing.

Imagine you're going skydiving. You've done the pre-flight safety course. You've been told exactly what to do in order to land safely. You know just when to pull the cord, so that the parachute will be released, so that you can take in this amazing world beneath you and land safely.

You're basically very confident that this will all go well, otherwise you would not be about to jump out of a plane. So the plane takes off. It eventually reaches the right altitude for your jump.

[10 : 48] You're told to get your gear on. You hardly believe what's about to happen. You're about to throw yourself out of a plane, but you have absolute faith in your parachute to work. But here's the problem.

Some idiot has left a normal backpack lying on the plane. Looks just like your parachute backpack, but you don't tell the difference, and you pick up the normal one.

You put it on with absolute faith that this will save you. You see the problem. Infinite faith even. Hugely increased faith in the wrong thing does not work.

Its consequences are disastrous. You may have many things in that backpack, but if it's not the parachutes, you're in enormous trouble.

Students, have you ever used past papers to revise for an exam? Have you ever looked at the exam that you're about to do for the last 20 years and seen the same question come up every single year?

[11 : 49] And you have absolute faith that will come up this year. I've been in this position, and you think this is definitely going to come up, so you make that the thing that you revise, and then you get into the exam, and it's not there.

You've revised nothing else. It's a disaster, even though you had absolute faith beforehand, that you would be fine, that you'd revise the question that was sure to come up.

Faith in the wrong thing, no matter how much of it you have, is useless. And Jesus knows that, and he sees that attitude in his disciples, the danger of this, and he understands what they're thinking. He knows that they live in a world full of sin. He knows that what he has just told them about the rich man and Lazarus, scares them, that they're scared over whether they will survive this world and arrive well in the next.

And because of that, because he understands how that works, what he tells them is that they're not going to be saved. They're not going to survive this world of sin and make it into heaven rather than hell, because of how much faith they have.

[12 : 58] He knows that the thing that will save them, the thing that will keep them in this world and take them well into the next, is rather whom they have faith in.

It's not how much faith they have, but in whom they place whatever faith they have. Which takes us on to our second point, Jesus' response, the mustard seed and the mulberry tree.

So Jesus is demonstrating this. The thing that makes faith effective is not its quantity, but rather what that faith is placed in. So he's not saying that the most important thing...

Sorry, he's saying the most important thing isn't how much faith you have. It's what you do with it. It's where you place it. It's whom you place it in. And he conveys that with an illustration.

He says, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, be up-rooted and then plant it in the sea, and it will obey you.

[13 : 59] Now, the illustration he uses is weird to us, but it's all really deliberate as Jesus chooses it. A mustard seed in Jesus' culture is, everyone knows in his world, that this is the tree with the plant, with the tiniest seeds that you can buy.

Jesus says that elsewhere in Mark 4. He says it's the smallest of all the seeds. A mulberry tree, on the other hand, is a remarkable tree. It's a tree that when it's planted, immediately grows up really

quickly and reaches a huge height and then stops.

And it lives for ages, and it's so solid. A mulberry tree, you use mulberry branches in Jesus' world to make baskets and farming implements because the wood is so strong.

So it's not a really wimpy little tree that you could blow over. Fully grown, it reaches almost 50 feet. It's a really useful tree because of its fruit, which people in his world would use to make jam and tarts.

Think of the image then. The strong contrast is between tiny, seemingly insignificant, the smallest thing that you can imagine, and huge, useful, strong, dense, rooted.

[15 : 18] Jesus is saying that the tiniest amount of faith, if it's used properly, carries an enormous effect. In our DNA, even, uprooting a tree is hard work.

Until very recently, there was a big, big tree just outside our living room. We live on the first floor of a tenement building. So when you look outside, there's this big tree, really tall, and trees next to tenements are bad for the buildings because they're root-spread under, and obviously they crave all the moisture and they dry out the foundations of the building.

So the tree had to go, and it was removed. And the roots also had to go because the roots are so bad for the foundations. It wasn't enough just to cut it down to a stump, but getting roots out to actually uproot a tree is difficult, so difficult, that the people who were taking this tree out had to take in a special machine designed to uproot trees.

It was amazing to watch. I was watching in awe out of the living room window as they brought this machine down, this big round motor that basically sucked the roots up. That's in the modern day. That's in the mechanical era. Watching them struggle with all of this machinery to uproot this tree made me think about why, generally, if you look at trees that have been removed before the era of big tree uprooting machines, what do you find?

[16 : 48] You find stumps because uprooting trees was so difficult. It was like that in the world of the Bible. If you wanted to get rid of a big old tree, unless you had an army of people who were willing to break their backs to do this, you had to leave the stump.

And you can see that in Job 14, where there's a reference to this in the biblical world, that to remove a tree, they had to leave it stump. They could go no further because the roots were so difficult to remove.

So in choosing the example of tree removal, not just leaving the stump, but actually uprooting it, Jesus is speaking about something that is very, very hard, if not humanly impossible to do.

And there's another example where Jesus is saying something very similar to this in Matthew. He speaks about having faith the size of a mustard seed, and you can tell a mountain to move, and it will do it.

Look at the words, then, that Jesus uses. They're specific, they're deliberate. Not only can a mustard seed-sized faith command this tree to be uprooted, it can also command the tree to plant itself in the sea.

[18 : 02] And that word for plant is, again, a specific word. It's not just for the tree to be thrown randomly into the sea. It's the word that the New Testament normally uses for vineyards, something that is deliberately planted and rooted down to stay.

Trees, of course, they're living creatures, but they don't speak. They don't tell us what they think. But if we can allow ourselves a moment of Tolkien-esque imagination, think of what this mulberry tree, this subtropical inland, useful, strong, fruit-bearing tree would say if you told it, uproot yourself and go and plant yourself out in the ocean.

What would it say? What are you talking about? That's madness. I live inland. I'm useful. I have a purpose there. I can't live in the sea. What will the saltwater do to me? What will happen to my fruits?

There is no way I'll do this. I won't go. I'm staying here. Isn't that what the tree would tell you? And yet Jesus says that a tiny morsel of faith can make this happen. He said it will obey you.

Do you see how Jesus is redirecting the disciples' focus? They want their faith to increase in quantity, but Jesus says, no, here is your starting point.

[19 : 25] It's what you do with what little faith you have. Even the tiniest amount is already enough to accomplish the otherwise impossible.

It can command mulberry trees to relocate into the sea. It can command mountains to move. Why did Jesus make this point, though? Doesn't he want them to have strong faith?

Doesn't he want their faith to grow and multiply? Is it like with hair gel? The packet says you only need a pea-sized blob. If you put the whole packet on, it's a mess.

Should we only ever aim to have a mustard seed-sized faith? Let's start for a moment to focus on this.

Jesus' point here in saying this and redirecting their focus to this is that it's not faith itself that saves us.

[20 : 20] Although we're saved by faith alone, it's not the faith itself that saves us. It's Jesus that saves us, and we get Jesus by faith. So faith is like a vehicle.

It's like the needle in which we get life-saving medicine. We need the needle to get the medicine into our bodies. It makes it happen, but it's the medicine that saves us. An empty needle does nothing.

It just pricks your skin. But if you have the medicine inside the needle, it will save you. Once you have the medicine, it's the medicine that you attribute your health to.

Is it not? You're glad for the needle because it got the medicine in there. But you become healthy in response to the medicine. And that's what Jesus wants us to see about our faith.

If we want to navigate our way through this world where sin is all around and we want to make sure that we're welcomed into eternal dwellings, as Jesus says, the one thing that we need is Jesus Christ Himself.

[21 : 22] We need to put whatever faith we have in Him, and even the tiniest amount of faith placed in Him is enough to make the impossible happen.

Time's moving on. Our third point is application, and I want to make two applications of this. The first is this. I'm sure a lot of you will have heard people say this.

If you had enough faith, you wouldn't be sick. Many of you will have come across Christians saying things like that. If you had enough faith, you wouldn't be in that wheelchair.

If you had enough faith, your cancer would disappear. So that will, if Jesus says that a mustard-sized, mustard seed-sized amount of faith can move mountains, doesn't that mean that if we have enough faith that we can be free of disease and of suffering?

Well, yes, if you read Jesus' words with total disregard for their context, if you take this sentence completely on its own and out of its context, you can interpret it to mean pretty much whatever you want.

[22 : 27] If I had enough faith, I would have arrived at church in a Ferrari this morning. But I didn't, so I must be a really second-class Christian who doesn't really trust in God.

If we respect Jesus enough to let His words speak honestly, and we do that by looking at sentences within paragraphs, within books, letting the context tell us what Jesus' words mean, we cannot look at what Jesus said about the mustard seed and the mulberry tree and think, if I had enough faith, I wouldn't be sick.

You cannot think of it like that, because Jesus gives these words as a response to people who thought, if I have enough faith, if I have more faith, I will be better off.

If you can increase my faith, I will be okay, I'll be less likely to suffer. Jesus saw that their problem was like this, was that they looked at it like this, and he saw that increasing their faith wasn't the solution.

The solution is to focus their faith on Jesus Christ, and inversely, that's the thing that will make their faith grow. The more faith is key to more blessing attitude is profoundly wrong, because it turns faith into a work, into something that we do, which is a sad irony, because the Bible always demonstrates what faith is, because it's not a work, they're different, they're opposite.

[23 : 59] Anyway, if you had enough faith, you wouldn't be sick, it's not true. The second application is this, don't make your primary focus how much faith you have.

Make your primary focus whom you have faith in. Don't make your big emphasis in life how much faith do I have.

Make it an emphasis on Jesus Christ himself, on the Lord. As we were saying before, the Bible does encourage us to grow in our faith. If a mustard seed sized faith can move mountains, can make mulberry trees do bizarre things, imagine what a mulberry tree size faith can accomplish, imagine what a mountain sized faith can do, it could change the universe.

So this chapter is not about resting on our laurels, as though it's okay as long as we have the tiniest amount, we don't need to work any more than that, we can just leave it there.

Jesus knows that his disciples need strong faith. He knows that because he knows what lies ahead for them, he knows that for some of them their faith in him will cost them their lives. They will be crucified like he was, they'll be fed to lions, they'll be ridiculed.

[25 : 16] He knows that Christians need strong faith, and it's because he knows that their faith must increase, it's actually because of that that he doesn't just say, okay, here you go, have 10 extra faith points, we'll crank it up a notch.

It's because they need to increase their faith that he says, look at me, put whatever faith you have in me. He's not telling them, continue with your tiny faith.

And he knows that they struggle. How often in the Bible do you read Jesus saying to people, oh you of little faith, how long will I continue with this faithless generation? But the key to changing that, to making the people of big faith, to making them a generation that is full of faith, is to direct them to himself.

If we want to increase our faith, the key is to learn what makes faith effective. If we want effective faith, place whatever you have in Jesus.

The more that you find yourself lost in wonder and in love for him, the more you'll rely on him, the more you'll believe and trust in him, the more your faith will increase.

[26 : 32] But it's not a 10-step program, 10 things that you can do, and then your faith will have increased. It's a living relationship. It's about loving him because you know he loved you first.

Didn't Paul tell us in Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 13, if I have all faith enough to move mountains, but have not love, and Paul always associates love in the church as coming from faith in Christ, but have not love, I am nothing.

I hope that as we're looking at faith, what it draws us to do is look at Jesus. And that faith isn't something that's nebulous and empty, and it is so often in our culture.

I hope that we're drawn to Jesus himself and that in loving him, that if we're mustard seed people, that we'll grow to mountain people, to mulberry tree-sized people whose faith changes Edinburgh, changes Scotland, changes Europe, and changes the world.

Let's bring this together to God in prayer. Our Father God, we thank you for your Son. You are His work among us when He came and became fully human.

[27 : 51] We thank you that He understands us, that He understands how much we struggle with faith, that for us even faith the size of a mustard seed is such a difficult thing so often.

We thank you that even the tiniest amount of faith placed in Christ achieves the impossible, that it saves sinners, that it brings spiritually dead people back to life.

Lord, we pray that you would help us to increase our faith, but not in a moralistic way, not in a mechanical way, but rather in an organic way, in a living way, by knowing Jesus Christ and by gaining more and more personal experience and knowledge through knowing Him.

So Lord, please draw us afresh to your Son Jesus, and by knowing Him we pray that you would help us to grow in our faith, and that through that we pray that the impossible would be achieved here in Edinburgh.

And we pray for this in His name. Amen.