

Put I Back in FAITH: Increase: Luke 17:1-10.

A soldier says it after awarded a medal for bravery.

A fireman says it after entering a burning building to rescue someone.

A policeman says it after risking his life to protect citizens from a criminal or a shooter.

A mother says it after protecting her child from a bully.

“I was just doing my duty. When I put on this uniform I accepted the duties that go with it.”

Put the ‘I’ back in FAITH stands for an INCREASE in faith to do what is seemingly IMPOSSIBLE for us. (Of course, nothing is impossible for God.)

THE CONTEXT BEFORE: Before the disciples’ faith-increase request. Giving an offense is a serious matter: 17:1-3: *And Jesus said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 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. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”*

Temptation to sin comes from the GR word *scandal* which means stumbling block. (The NT example of a “stumbling block” is eating food offered to idols.) “Little ones” comes from the GR word *micros* and it means little, small, of least importance, insignificant. It refers to immature (weak) disciples, not children. Be careful that your words and behavior don’t produce a temptation for other “little ones” to sin.

- ✓ If you are disrespectful in Sunday school class and cause other immature believers to disrespect the teacher and Bible lesson, then you are causing those other believers to sin and it would be better to be thrown off the M Bridge into the Mississippi with a cinder block chained to your feet.
- ✓ If you surf the web and text during worship service and a weaker brother or sister sees you, then you have become a stumbling block because others will be tempted to do the same or sin with a judgmental attitude. It would be better to be thrown into the Mississippi with a cinder block chained to your feet.
- ✓ If you are known as a Christian and post something on *Facebook* (or any other social media) that is ungodly and gives an offense or is a stumbling block, then you may cause other immature believers to justify their sin and it would be better for you to be thrown into the Mississippi.

THE REQUEST

The apostles said to the Lord, "INCREASE our faith!" The Greek word for increase (prosthes) involves increasing the existing substance rather than adding a new substance.

In other words the disciples said, "We have some faith. Lord, increase it so we can do our duty." (Imagine a soldier hiding in a foxhole. He is in the battle so has some courage. His officer commands him to charge the enemy. The soldier says, "Increase my courage so I can obey your command, climb out of this safe foxhole, and charge the enemy.")

"Increase our faith" is an excellent request. Every Christian needs to increase his/her faith. Consider Hebrews 11:1 definition of faith: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Our assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen should be increasing, never decreasing. A stagnant, unused faith is a decreasing faith. A car has Park, Reverse, Neutral and Drive. Faith has D - drive - it can increase. Faith has R - reverse - it can decrease due to unrepentant sin, ignorance of the Word, and doubt, fear or apathy. But it cannot be in Neutral or Park - a stagnant unused faith is really a decreasing faith. Faith is a noun, but it's like an action verb. Faith without works or action is dead.

Put the 'I' back in FAITH stands for an INCREASE in faith to do what is seemingly IMPOSSIBLE for us. (Of course, nothing is impossible for God.)

THE CONTEXT AFTER: After the disciples' faith-increase request. Forgiving an offense is a Christian's duty: 17:4-10. *"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."* This causes the disciples to exclaim, "Increase our faith!"

Jesus responded to their request with a mustard-seed simile and a parable of a servant's duty. The mustard-seed simile teaches something about faith. *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."*

It may seem like Jesus discouraged their request for an increase in faith with the mustard-seed comparison. They asked for an increase and Jesus seemed to say small faith is good enough. "We're asking for an increase and you want our faith to get smaller! How could our faith get any smaller?"

This is a first-century Jewish way of saying, "It really doesn't take much faith. Your faith could be like a mustard seed and you can do seemingly impossible things... like forgive someone who repeatedly sins against you."

Note: the phrase 'as small as' is not in the text. Jesus is not emphasizing smallness, but the potential power of any amount of faith when it is rooted in His love and power. Mustard-Seed Faith (MSF) has the power to speak a command and uproot a tree and throw it into the ocean.

The mustard seed simile (comparison) has one point. A seed of genuine faith focused on God has the power to accomplish something seemingly impossible... like forgiving a repeat offender who sins against you 7 times in one day.

Mustard-Seed Faith can speak a command and uproot a tree and throw it into the ocean; that is, MSF can forgive an unlimited number of offenses.

Jesus used mustard seed faith in another incident: Matthew 17:14-21: The disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't cast a demon out of a boy. 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."

MSF = Mustard-Seed Faith can command a mountain to move; that is, MSF can cast out demons; that is, free people from demonic oppression.

Mustard-Seed Faith can speak a command, uproot a tree, and throw it into the ocean; that is, MSF can forgive an unlimited number of offenses.

The servant parable teaches Christian obligation - duty.

17:7-10: *"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"*

[I served in a church and it didn't do anything for Pastor Appreciation Month in October. It's good to be appreciated, but I'm not going to be angry and quit the ministry because I don't get appreciated. "I am an unworthy servant and I have only done my duty." *I do feel appreciated here. I have received many gifts. Thank you!* So, if you're serving in the church and nobody appreciates your service and says "Thank you" remember you are only an unworthy servant who has only done his/her duty.]

The duty here is forgiveness of a repeat offender who repents. It is our duty to forgive as God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ. Don't expect God to slap you on the back and say, "I really want to compliment you on the way you forgave that brother who said he was sorry." After you forgive you say, "I'm an unworthy sinner who has been forgiven. I have only done my duty."

In context this was their request, “Lord, increase our faith or we will never be able to do such a difficult duty as this!” BUT even the smallest seeds have power within and increase and grow into trees. We all start with a small seed of faith and increase it. Jesus meant, “You have enough faith to do your duty. Yes, it is like a seed now, but it will increase as you follow Me and learn to trust Me.”

Jesus commanded “Love one another as I have loved you.” Forgiving a Christian brother/sister is under the love command.

Repentance & Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a difficult duty, but only required when the offender repents. Forgiveness presupposes repentance. God doesn’t forgive us until we repent. If God forgave everyone in the world without repentance, then He would have to let them into heaven without any sorrow for sin or gratitude for His Son’s sacrifice. God would have to let people into heaven who hated Him. There will be no people in heaven who have not repented of their sin and their ingratitude toward God for the sacrifice of Christ.

David repented and then received forgiveness: Psalm 32:1-5:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

*Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity;

*I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

If someone sins against you and never repents, then your attitude toward that person will be an attitude of distrust. You don’t have to trust that person again. You should pray for that person’s repentance. You must not keep anger, bitterness and resentment in your heart. *(That’s more destructive to your relationship with God and your emotional health than the offense itself.)* Attempt to resolve the offense so there can be repentance and forgiveness.

BUT if there is no resolution then you must “let it go.” I always sing Princess Elsa’s *Frozen* song for this, but she means it differently! “Let it go, let it go. Can’t hold it back anymore.” *(Frozen princess cannot hold back her frozen powers anymore.)* My prayer is “Jesus, help me to let it go; that is, bitterness and resentment. What I cannot hold back anymore is forgiveness; that is, releasing someone from a debt. The closest I can come to “letting it go”

in the Bible is “Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” in the Lord’s Prayer. “Letting it go” is releasing an offender from the debt of love he/she owes you. So, “Letting it go” may be considered a form of forgiveness.

Seeds grow and increase into trees. Faith increases when tested. If you want to put the ‘I’ - ‘Increase’ - back in your FAITH then God will test your faith to increase it. A test is resistance to your faith. I have a Bowflex at home and as I increase the resistance I increase my muscle strength. The Bowflex resistance represents a test of faith and as my faith works against the resistance it increases just like my muscle strength. It increases as I stay focused on God’s love, faithfulness, and power.

There are many ways faith is tested in this world for an increase – accidents, sickness, poverty, persecution. Forgiving multiple offenses - a person who sins against you seven times in one day - is a significant TEST of faith. Forgiveness does require an increase in faith. We have to trust God will vindicate us, reward us, and restore a broken relationship. Proverbs 19:11: *Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.* (“Overlook” here sounds like “let it go.”)

Conclusion - Lessons:

The point of the mustard seed simile and servant parable is that even seed-like faith is enough to accomplish seemingly impossible things, so it is certainly enough to do our Christian duty; that is, offer forgiveness first to our brothers/sisters in Christ, and second to any person who offends and then repents.

Forgiveness is a Christian’s duty and required when there is repentance by the offender.

Story from ***Cain’s Redemption*** - Feltus Taylor asked for forgiveness and Keith Clark forgave, but they waited until Feltus was moments away from his death by lethal injection.

Louisiana State Prison at Angola was once called the bloodiest prison in America. 5000 inmates serving life sentences without parole. Burl Cain became the warden in 1995 and presided over his first execution by lethal injection. Cain, recalling the inmates death, said, “I felt him go to hell as I held his hand. Then the thought came over me: I just killed a man. I said nothing to him about his soul. I didn’t give him a chance to get right with God. What does God think of me? I decided I would never again put someone to death without telling him about his soul and about Jesus.”

So, Burl Cain instituted a program of moral rehabilitation with churches and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He allowed the Gospel to be preached throughout the prison.

Chapel services were packed with inmates confessing sins and becoming new men in Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Feltus Taylor as the next inmate Cain was ordered to execute. Feltus was sentenced to die for shooting two restaurant employees in 1991. One died. The owner of the restaurant, Keith Clark, survived but was paralyzed from the neck down after being shot multiple times in the head. Feltus had been in prison 9 years and his execution had been delayed several times - one time just 2 hours before his execution. Feltus was one of the first inmates to become a forgiven man in Jesus Christ during Cain's "moral rehabilitation" program.

The day finally came for his execution in 2000. Warden Cain said, "I met with Feltus and we prayed together. Feltus was a strong Christian. He walked to the execution chamber and nobody had to carry him. He was strapped to the lethal injection gurney."

Keith Clark, confined to a wheelchair, watched through the execution chamber window. Cain told Keith Clark about Feltus' decision to commit his life to Jesus Christ and how he had become a model inmate serving at chapel services.

Cain recalled the final moments, "Feltus was strapped to the lethal injection gurney. I held his hand and told him to get ready to see Jesus' face. He looked into my eyes and said, 'Please tell Keith Clark I'm sorry for what I did to him and Donna.' I bent down and whispered in his ear, 'I will. Keith asked me to tell you that he forgives you.' Those were the last words Feltus heard on this earth. He smiled and closed his eyes. The lethal drugs entered his body. He breathed twice, and then his breathing stopped."

There is justice. Sin must be paid for. But the power and beauty of forgiveness triumphs over it. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). Let's not forget - we are forgiven 7 times a day. By our repentance all sins past, present, and future are covered by the blood of Christ.