

2 October 2016

Lamentations 1:1-6  
2 Timothy 1:1-14  
Luke 17:5-10

We seem to live in a world obsessed with more – “but wait there’s more” is the classic hook-line used in teleshopping advertisements; we are invited to “up-size” or “super-size” our drinks and fries, to have the “double down” at KFC; the average new house in New Zealand is now 60% larger than those built 50 years ago, while the average number of occupants has fallen by 20%; we are told that increased variety and choice is our right; and so on ...

The television and the Internet have brought lifestyle envy into our lives at a level never before experienced in human history.

We live in a society increasingly obsessed with self-improvement and success, but which does not seem to realise that we can’t simultaneously attain all the varied definitions of success put in front of us.

We live in a culture with a deep fear of insufficiency, a fear of lack, of not-enough.

We can be a bit like that in relation to faith also. We want more; we want to be superior, perhaps; we want to have greater power, greater control over our affairs. If only I had more faith, then I could pray and things would be different for me – things would go my way, I would be free of this hardship or this illness, I would be more content ...

Or perhaps our cry for increased faith is driven by other motivations.

It may be the cry that comes from the deepest darkest places of our lives.

It may come from a deep awareness of weakness and an inability to conquer sin.

It may come in the time of near despair over personal illness or tragedy; or as we struggle over illness, hardship or tragedy occurring in the life of someone else.

It may come in the midst of events in the world we struggle to comprehend – such as the senseless war in Ukraine; such as massive floods in Pakistan; such as increasing divisiveness in societies of many different stripes, including our own; ... and on and on we could go.

Our cry for increased faith may come in the midst of the life of the church, as we struggle to know what to do about nationally declining rates of attendance, depleted finances, too many buildings that may need strengthening, and an increasingly unchurched community. Our cry may come in the midst of experiencing change; or in our struggling to deal with the hurts we cause our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our cry for increased faith may come when we start to feel without hope for the future.

Do you want more faith? Why?

“Increase our faith” we cry.

But what do we imagine that more faith will get us? An easier life? Less pain? More certainty? Effortless answers?

The disciples cry “Increase our faith!”

However, the disciples don’t seem to be asking for more faith because they’ve been touched by the attitudes of our modern consumerist self-improvement culture, or because they’re faced with despair.

In chapter 17 of Luke’s Gospel the context for the disciples’ request of Jesus is that he has just given them instruction on a couple of things:

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘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 round their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves.

‘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.’

The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ [Luke 17:1-5]

So the context for the request for increased faith comes from a couple of specific things:

- First, the warning to watch themselves lest they lay stumbling blocks in the way of others coming to faith – such a stumbling block might be testing the newcomers with expectations and demands that upon reflection they would recognise they themselves realistically can't meet.
- Second, the challenge to forgive their brothers and sisters in the family of God – to forgive and to keep forgiving.

These two challenges prompt the response “Increase our faith!” It seems a fair enough request in the context – these are the sorts of things that can indeed test our faith.

But Jesus doesn't respond to the request by giving them more faith. Instead he says, “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.”

Now, Jesus isn't being literal here. It's not that what Jesus suggested is impossible. What I'm saying is that Jesus isn't talking about dashing around making impressive displays, as if we had magical powers. Such an act would need to have a more noble purpose than simply a display of spiritual prowess. It would have to be within God's will.

Jesus' point is simply this: in the matter of faith, it is not about size. Jesus is here using a dramatic contrast. The mustard seed is small. The mulberry tree, in contrast, has an enormous root system. The rabbinical tradition was that the roots of this tree would remain in the earth for 600 years. It was very firmly rooted. The issue isn't *how much* faith one has got in God; the issue is whether one has faith *at all*. In fact the Greek implies this: the sense of Jesus' response seems to be, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, which you don't, you could say to this mulberry tree ...”.

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you”.

To suggest that the issue is about how much faith we've got, is to put the onus on us, and to make God's ability to act dependent on us. But that's not how it works. It is God who is the powerful one. As Paul says to Timothy –

Christ has saved us and called us to a holy life – *not because of anything we have done* but because of his own purpose and grace ... given us in Christ Jesus, ... revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. [2 Timothy 1:9-10]

So the issue is not about having a powerful faith, but about having faith in a powerful God, the God who can do all things, the God who destroyed death. Nothing is impossible to faith – and so God can help the disciples live grace-filled and merciful lives that avoid putting stumbling blocks in the way of those new to faith; and God can supply the disciples with the capacity to make a habit of forgiving the repentant, even if it means forgiving the same person seven times over in one day!

God does not care about the volume of our faith, but rather its presence. Because the point is that what is at work is not me in all my weakness, imperfection, and doubt. What is at work is God; God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life; God who is the one who is faithful to the end. Someone once put it very well in saying, "Don't tell God how big your problem is; tell the problem how big God is". The mindset is a focus on God; not on ourselves.

Our first, and main, responsibility is to trust God. As Paul says to young Timothy, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

Among the obsessions of the age in which we live, is the obsession with power. Timothy's problem is the opposite – he is not in danger of enjoying God's power too much: rather the reverse. He needs to know that God delights to exercise his power through Christian ministry. But the power of the true God is never mere brute power; it is revealed in Jesus Christ to be also the power of love, and is to be exercised through and in self-control, moderately and prudently.

So, Paul reminds Timothy, in our suffering for the gospel we rely on the power of God. Clearly this is not a power that enables us to avoid hardship and suffering – despite the claims of some in Christian circles. Beware the prosperity gospel, which keys into exactly the kinds of cultural tendencies I mentioned at the start. This is not a power that enables us to avoid hardship and suffering. What we find is that when we are at the end of our resources, then God's power works through us.

I want to return to Luke, to the second part of what Jesus says. When Jesus talks about the situation of the servant, it jangles a bit. I grew up on a farm. After working hard for Dad there was nothing better than to come in from the cold, wet, and dark outside, to the warmth and light of the house, to the smells of the dinner Mum was cooking. I don't think I would have liked it much if I'd arrived home to find Dad already sat there, saying to me "OK, now get the tea on."

I also like the idea of being rewarded for what I've done! Or at least thanked. Or let off some other duty because of the hard work I've already done.

So what's going on here? Well the background is that many households had a single servant or slave who performed multiple functions. The servant's duties would include working in the fields and preparing and serving food. So Jesus is describing normality. He is basically saying "Would a household slave expect to be let off with half duties and be waited upon by his master?"

Why is he saying this? Well firstly it is a warning against the sort of spiritual pride that could come from displays of the power of faith. It would be very easy to get carried away with miracle working, to boast of it, and to consider one's self as the source of the power.

And such humility should apply also to matters that would not be regarded as miraculous, but in which we should see the hand of God at work. If and when we enjoy them, to whom do we ascribe our power, our wealth, our success, our achievements?

Secondly, Jesus' description of what is expected of a slave is a recognition that faith should be worked out in service. Humble service comes out of obedience to God. "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty".

But the main point is that nothing can put the God of grace in our debt. God – to whom we owe our existence and our salvation – owes us nothing. *God owes us nothing.*

This may sound rather harsh; but if we think again we should see that it is really freeing. It is freeing because we can never do enough to earn God's favour. God's favour is not down to anything we can do for him; it simply comes out of his grace and love.

This understanding should then free us from anxious striving; and free us to respond to what God has done for us by extending his forgiveness, love and grace to others – in witness, justice-seeking, and service.

... join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. [2 Timothy 1:8-9]

#### Sources

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