

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Increase Our Faith

Luke 17:5-6

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

Several years ago I stumbled across a TV show that featured an illusionist. Intrigued, I watched a fascinating segment. The illusionist and his audience of several hundred people were outside, on the edge of a bay. I believe they were in Hawaii. Most of the audience sat on bleachers looking at a mountain on the other side of the bay. The illusionist asked the audience to get a clear picture of the scene in their mind's eye. Then he rolled a large screen in front of them so that the water and the mountain were blocked from their view. After talking with the audience for a short while, he rolled the screen out of the way. And everyone – including myself – was astonished to see that the mountain had entirely disappeared! It was as if the mountain had just been taken up and thrown into the sea.

You may recall that Jesus once talked about taking up a mountain and throwing it into the sea. On that occasion Jesus healed a boy who was possessed by a demon. His disciples were not able to cast the demon out of the boy. And so they came to Jesus privately and said to him, “Why could we not cast it out?” And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen” (Matthew 21:20-21). The disciples did not, of course, lack faith. But their faith was not functioning properly. The disciples encountered a problem, namely, a boy who was possessed by a demon, and they were unable to cast it out. Jesus essentially said that if they had the right kind of faith, then they could accomplish the seemingly impossible – even moving mountains and casting demons out of boys.

You and I live in a fallen and sinful world. We sin against

one another and we are sinned against. Usually, we are able to forgive someone who sins against us. We are able to forgive someone who says an unkind word to us, does not do something as promised, gets angry with us, and so on.

But, sometimes, we find it very difficult – seemingly impossible – to forgive someone who sins against us. We find it seemingly impossible to forgive someone who has abused us, or has deeply wounded us by words or actions. What do we do then?

Have you found yourself struggling to forgive someone? Someone has sinned against you and you find it difficult – seemingly impossible – to forgive that person. What do you do then? How do you get to that place where you are able to do the seemingly impossible and forgive someone for his or her sin against you?

Jesus addressed this question in our text for today. We shall learn that forgiveness for Jesus was an issue of faith.

Let's read about increasing our faith in Luke 17:5-6:

**⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"
⁶ 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."** (Luke 17:5-6)

Introduction

The story is told about George Danzig, who was a senior at Stanford University during the Great Depression. All the seniors knew they'd be joining unemployment lines when the class graduated. There was a slim chance that the top person in the class might get a teaching job. George was not at the head of his class, but he hoped that if he were able to achieve a perfect score on the final exam, he might be given a job.

He studied so hard for the exam that he arrived late to class. When he got to class, the others were already hard at

work. He was embarrassed and just picked up his paper and slunk into his desk. He sat down and worked the eight problems on the test paper; then he started on the two written on the board. Try as he might, he couldn't solve either of them. He was devastated. Out of the ten problems, he had missed two for sure. But just as he was about to hand in the paper, he took a chance and asked the professor if he could have a couple of days to work on the two he had missed. He was surprised when his professor agreed.

George rushed home and plunged into those equations with zeal. He worked hours and hours, but could find the solution for only one of them. He could not solve the other one. It was impossible. When he turned in the test, he knew he had lost all chance of a job. That was the darkest moment of his life.

The next morning a pounding on the door awakened George. It was his mathematics professor, very excited. "George! George!" he kept shouting, "You've made mathematics history!"

George didn't know what his professor was talking about. The professor explained. Before the exam, he had encouraged the class to keep trying in spite of setback and failure. "Don't be discouraged," he had counseled. "Remember, there are classic problems that no one can solve. Even Einstein was unable to unlock their secrets." He then wrote two of those problems on the blackboard. George had come to class late and missed those opening remarks. He didn't know the problems on the board were impossible to solve. He thought they were part of his exam, and he solved one of them!

He did the impossible.

That very morning the professor made George Danzig his assistant. He taught at Stanford until his retirement.¹

George Danzig solved a seemingly impossible mathematical problem.

¹ See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/september/13260.html>.

Jesus' disciples were struggling with an impossible problem. Jesus taught his disciples to forgive others, even those who had sinned repeatedly against them. To them, it was impossible to forgive someone who had sinned repeatedly against them. They were having real trouble forgiving others.

Do you sometimes have trouble forgiving others?

Lesson

The analysis of faith in Luke 17:5-6 teaches us that if we are having trouble forgiving others, then we need an increase of faith.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Request by the Apostles (17:5)
2. The Response by the Lord (17:6)

I. The Request by the Apostles (17:5)

First, let's look at the request by the apostles.

Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem. The closer Jesus got to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, the more he taught his disciples about important aspects regarding Christian discipleship. Jesus wanted his disciples to display to the world the characteristics of those who were members of his kingdom.

Jesus had just warned his disciples regarding temptations to sin (Luke 17:1-3a). He warned them of the terrible fate that awaits the one who causes another to stumble into sin. And he warned them to pay attention to themselves that they not lead anyone into sin.

Following these stern warnings, Jesus taught his disciples about forgiveness of sin (Luke 17:3b-4). They were to rebuke the sinner, forgive the repentant sinner, and forgive the repentant sinner repeatedly.

It was at this point that the disciples simply had to interrupt Jesus. What Jesus taught them was impossible and way beyond their capability, and they desperately needed help.

And we understand that because we often do not find it easy to forgive others as well. At times it is seemingly impossible to forgive others who have sinned repeatedly or deeply against us. Yes, it is challenging not leading anyone into sin. It is hard to rebuke a brother in sin in a way that leads to real repentance. It is sometimes difficult to forgive people who have sinned against us. But to forgive a person seven times a day? That is impossible. How can anyone do that? “With customary hyperbole,” says Philip Ryken, “Jesus is telling us to take forgiveness to the ultimate extreme. He is telling us to forgive the unforgivable.”²

Philip Ryken continues by asking, “But what if we had to offer such forgiveness repeatedly? How could we even do it?”

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf wrestled with this question after giving a public lecture on Christian forgiveness. As soon as the lecture ended, the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann stood up and asked, “But can you embrace a *cetnik*?” Here is how Volf explains what Moltmann was really asking, and the answer he gave:

It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters called “*cetnik*” had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a *cetnik* – the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it?³

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 213.

³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 9.

Ryken continues, “Sooner or later this is a question we all have to face: Can I embrace the *četnik* in my life – the person who has done me the most harm? Can I forgive the abuser and the betrayer? Miroslav Volf waited a long time before giving his answer. But finally, he said, ‘No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.’ ”⁴

Jesus’ disciples knew that they should be able to forgive others. But they were having real trouble knowing how they could forgive some people, especially those who had repeatedly sinned against them. How could they ever forgive someone who had sinned against them seven times in a day? So, they asked Jesus for help. **The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”** (17:5).

Phil Ryken says:

This may be one of the smartest things the disciples ever did. They did not ask for more obedience to live the way Jesus wanted them to live. They did not ask for more courage and compassion to confront people’s sin. They did not ask for more patience with people it was hard for them to love. All of those things were needed, of course, but what the disciples demanded was more faith, especially the faith to forgive. This is what we need any time Jesus tells us to do something that seems impossible: more faith. We need more faith in the promises of God the Father, more faith in the grace of God the Son, and more faith in the power of God the Holy Spirit. Since we cannot increase this faith by our own strength, we must ask God for it.⁵

Forgiveness is ultimately a gospel issue. By ourselves, we are utterly incapable of putting our faith in God. And so we ask God to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. We ask him to give us true, saving faith. And he does.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 213-214.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 214.

Forgiving others who have sinned repeatedly or deeply against is a perfect example of the need for faith. We do not have power within ourselves to forgive others. We need a supernatural work of God to enable us to forgive others. That is why we need God to grow our faith in him and in his transformative power so that we are truly able to forgive others.

Kent Hughes puts it this way:

If we are having trouble forgiving, we need faith. We need to believe that God is in control, that he is not slumbering. We need to believe he loves us. We need to believe he will take care of us. We need to believe he is equitable. We need to pray “Increase my faith!” – then take the step and forgive.⁶

The faith we need to forgive others is a faith that looks to Jesus on the cross. We remember that Jesus was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. And yet there on the cross he forgave those who had grievously sinned against them.

The kind of forgiveness needed to forgive those who have sinned against us repeatedly or deeply is illustrated in the book, *To End All Wars*. The British army officer Ernest Gordon wrote it, and the book tells the story of the infamous Japanese prison camp on the River Kwai. The conditions in the camp were dreadful, and many prisoners died. At one point Gordon himself was given up for dead. Yet, by God’s grace he survived, and he along with other prisoners came to saving faith in Jesus.

After their conversion to Jesus, these new Christians met together for worship. They prayed the Lord’s Prayer. But they struggled to pray one of the petitions: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Why did they struggle? Gordon explained as follows:

It was because it meant asking forgiveness for the Japa-

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 167.

nese. We had learned from the gospels that Jesus had his enemies just as we had ours. But there was this difference: he loved his enemies. He prayed for them. Even as the nails were being hammered through his hands and feet, he cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We hated our enemies. We could see how wonderful it was that Jesus forgave in this way. Yet for us to do the same seemed beyond our attainment.⁷

How was Gordon able to do the impossible and forgive his enemies? By going to the cross of Jesus and finding forgiveness there for his own sin and also the empowerment to forgive those whom he found it impossible to forgive.

This breakthrough took place on a Good Friday, and here is how Gordon described what happened to him:

I recognized that it was no easy thing to call that figure on the Cross "Lord." I heard again His words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This He had said for His enemies; but what was I to say for mine? I could not say what He had said, for He was innocent, whereas I was not. Humbly, I had to ask, "Forgive me and my enemies, for we know not what we do."⁸

Where do you find the faith to forgive someone who has sinned repeatedly or deeply against you? You find it at the cross of Jesus where you have received forgiveness. As you consider how God has forgiven you for every single one of your sins, you are enabled by his grace to forgive others as well.

II. The Response by the Lord (17:6)

And second, notice the response by the Lord.

⁷ Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (1963; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 156.

⁸ Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars*, 189.

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” (17:6).

At least this time Jesus did not tell them to move any mountains into the sea! Perhaps Jesus was scaling back on his expectations because the disciples were not moving any mountains into the sea, and so he decided that he would encourage them with something seemingly easier. But even uprooting a tree and planting it in the sea was daunting!

Jesus used a **mulberry tree** as an illustration because it has an extensive root system and is extremely difficult to uproot. An unforgiving spirit is extensive and extremely difficult to uproot. And Jesus’ point is that faith is required to something that only God can do. Moving the tree was simply an illustration of something that we cannot do, but God can. If God calls us to do something impossible, like forgiving someone who has sinned repeatedly or deeply against us, then we need faith in God’s enabling power to do it.

And all it takes to forgive someone is **faith like a grain of mustard seed**. Apparently, a **mustard seed** is extremely small. And so Jesus was saying that only a tiny amount of faith is needed to forgive someone. Or to put it differently, it is not so much the size of one’s faith that is important, but that one’s faith is in God and his power. As Leon Morris put it, “It is not so much great faith in God that is required as faith in a great God.”⁹

The important thing is not the *size* of your faith but the *object* of your faith. All that is needed to do the seemingly impossible, such as forgiving someone who has sinned repeatedly or deeply against you, is to put your faith in our great God.

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 189.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed faith in Luke 17:5-6, we should ask God for an increase of faith.

Phil Ryken tells the story of a Zulu chief whose wife was converted to faith in Jesus Christ at an evangelistic meeting. When he heard what had happened, the chief was enraged. He told his wife he would never let her go to an evangelistic meeting ever again. But she was drawn by the beauty of Christ and the grace of his cross, so she went back the very next day to hear the gospel.

When the chief discovered where his wife had gone, he went to find her. In his rage he dragged her out of the village, beat her savagely, and left her for dead. But later, when he wondered if she had survived, he went back out into the bush to look for her. He found her lying on the ground – bleeding, gasping, and not far from death.

“And what can your Jesus Christ do for you now?” he scoffed.

The woman’s eyes fluttered open, and she said, very gently, very quietly, “He helps me to forgive you!”¹⁰

That is the power of the gospel. That is the power of God. That is no illusionist’s trick.

Is there someone in your life who has sinned against you repeatedly or deeply? Is there someone you find difficult – seemingly impossible – to forgive?

Put your faith in Jesus. He will not only save you, but he will empower you to forgive that person you have found impossible to forgive. Amen.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 218.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp
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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for Jesus' teaching on dealing with forgiving those who have sinned repeatedly or deeply against us. Jesus' teaching is always so clear and so practical.

O God, there are some here today who are struggling to forgive someone who has sinned repeatedly or deeply against them. Perhaps this sin took place recently, or perhaps it took place a long time ago, or over a period of a long time.

Whatever the cause of the particular sin, O Father, will you enable each one of us to look to Jesus on the cross. It is there that we find forgiveness for our own sin. And it is also there that we find the grace and the power to forgive those who have sinned against us.

O Father, may we be known as forgiving persons.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!