

A Mustard Seed

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And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Luke 17:5-6).

The mustard seed was the smallest seed used by farmers and gardeners in Israel during the days of Jesus. A mature plant could reach ten feet in height. The mustard seed illustrates how small beginnings lead to big outcomes.

Jesus uses the example in the context of forgiveness. To forgive another person for an offense can be incredibly difficult. To forgive the same person for seven offenses in a day seems an impossible demand. Like the apostles, I find myself asking Jesus to increase my faith.

How do we measure faith? Do we describe faith in terms of units? No, we tend to measure faith by its impact. We intuit that slaying a giant or confronting Pharaoh required more faith than we can muster: "I could never have that much faith."

But how much faith was in Sarah's heart when she decided to trust in the faithfulness of God? Did Noah spend a century building a boat for a series of unprecedented events without a moment or two of doubt? Were Gideon's three hundred men absolutely certain they would live through a battle with an army that likely numbered in the tens of thousands? If we measure faith by its results, why then do mountains and mulberry trees move with only a small amount of faith?

When it comes to faith, the outcome is not proportional to belief. Faith does not move mountains or slay giants. Such impossible and improbable feats rely solely on the power of God. Great things are not achieved by great faith. God achieves great things through people with a small measure of faith. God makes a little bit of faith go a long way.

Jesus does not rebuke us for our lack of faith by comparing it to mustard seed. Rather, He teaches us the seemingly impossible takes less faith than we think. To forgive our brother seven times in a day is achievable, it is not beyond our reach or our capability. We only need to believe a little bit more.

Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:23-27).

And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you (Matthew 17:14-20).