

Mustard Seeds, Mulberry Trees, and Faith

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There's an awful lot to think about in these four verses, so let's unpack it a bit. Listen to the first two verses again: Jesus says to his disciples, "Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it's personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he says, 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive him."

The first thing that I notice is that Jesus isn't *asking* us or *suggesting* that we correct our friend. He's telling us, *commanding* us to confront a friend who has "gone wrong." I'm trying to imagine confronting someone and saying, "Listen, my friend, what you just said about me really hurt. It was wrong of you, and you should apologize." Honestly, the thought of doing that really makes me squirm. That's partly because I grew up in a house with a lot of yelling, fighting, and even throwing things—mostly between my parents when Dad had been drinking. Conflict is not my favorite activity, to put it mildly.

But I think it goes beyond that. I think that our culture teaches us—especially women—that if someone is mad at you, insults you, or demeans you, it's probably at least partly your own fault. And if we believe that we're the problem, then the perpetrator is never confronted with their hurtful behavior or words and thus is never forgiven for them. Jesus says that's the wrong approach.

This isn't the only place in the Gospels where Jesus gives us this commandment to confront and correct our friends. In Matthew 18:15–17, we find these difficult words: "If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along . . . and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love."

I know what you're thinking. When I got to the part that said, "If he won't listen to the church," you thought that Jesus was going to say, "Well, at that point you've done your best. But it didn't work, so just forget it and move on."

But no, Jesus tells us to start all over again—to *again* give this person who has wronged us a private, loving rebuke. Why? Because Jesus knows that if we don't do that, we're likely to continue to feel hurt—maybe for years—nurse a grudge, and tell other people what happened to us. And honestly, we all know that no good can come of that.

This theme—this commandment to confront and forgive—appears repeatedly throughout the New Testament. In Ephesians 4:15, we’re told to “speak the truth in love” as the first step toward solving personal differences. In Galatians 6:1, we’re reminded that our aim is not to embarrass or hurt the offender, but to encourage them to repent. And if they do repent, then we must forgive them.

New Testament churches didn’t have pastors—no ordained, professional clergy that people could ask to mediate or even fix a situation for them. Followers of Jesus Christ were taught to be open and honest in talking directly with each other, speaking the truth in love and forgiving without hesitation, over and over again. In Colossians 3:13, Ephesians 4:32, and several other verses, we are told to forgive each other just as God has forgiven us.

So does God expect us to forgive someone who keeps hurting us? Yes, we are supposed to love one another that much. But it takes two people to bring about reconciliation, and some relationships are just more difficult than others. Paul tells us in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

We’ve all been in situations where, for whatever reason, the other person doesn’t want to make peace. In fact, if we’re honest with ourselves, we’ve all been on both sides of that equation. Sometimes, when we’ve hurt or offended someone else, it can take us a long time to get to the point of repenting and apologizing. Maybe we felt justified in what we did, or perhaps the other person misunderstood us. The point is to keep moving, with God’s help, in the direction of honesty and openness, mutual respect, and Christian love for one another.

In the very next verse in this passage from Luke, the disciples say to Jesus, “Give us more faith. Increase our faith.” They’ve heard Jesus’s command for them to be completely open and honest with one another, and to cultivate a habit of forgiving and apologizing to one another. In essence, Jesus has told them to make speaking the truth in love part of their spiritual journey. But the disciples find this idea completely overwhelming. In fact, they don’t believe they can do it unless Jesus gives them more faith, so they say, “Okay, Master, we’ll try. But first you’ll have to give us more faith.”

Faith is one of those words—like *redemption* or *covenant*—that Christians use often, but we seldom stop to think about what they really mean. What do we mean when we call ourselves “people of faith”? Well, for starters, here’s what *Webster’s Dictionary* says: Faith is “the act or state of wholeheartedly and steadfastly believing in the existence, power, and benevolence of a supreme being.” In short, faith is “belief in, and trust in, and loyalty to God.”

The New Testament, of course, was originally written in Greek, and the Greek word for “to have faith” meant “to trust,” rather than to “to believe.” Believing in God doesn’t make us faithful

people. We can believe in God without trusting God, and a lot of people do. Having faith is not about having a belief system clearly outlined in your head, with an answer to every question and a solution to every problem. Instead, having faith is about trust—trust in God’s goodness and love. To have faith means to trust the faithfulness of God.

In the ninth chapter of Mark, a father asks Jesus to heal his son, who he believes is possessed by an evil spirit. When Jesus asks the man to have faith, the man says these words: “I do believe. Help my unbelief!” The man isn’t talking about an intellectual process, but a heart process—an “all in” process. He’s saying, “Jesus, I do trust you, but it isn’t easy. Help me trust you.”

The Jewish Orthodox Bible uses the word *emunah* for faith. Tzvi Freeman is a Jewish rabbi who writes about Jewish mysticism and meditation. Freeman says that we’re used to thinking of *emunah*—faith—as a strategy for people who can’t think for themselves. We tend to value our ability to think and reason over our ability to feel and trust. But *emunah* is an innate conviction, a perception of truth that transcends reason. Reason can never attain the certainty of faith, which is similar to seeing something with your own eyes.

Have any of you ever participated in a trust fall? That’s where you cross your arms over your chest and deliberately fall backward off a stage, platform, chair, whatever—trusting that your friends, who are standing behind you, are going to catch you. Trust falls are sometimes used as team-building exercises. The theologian Peter Enns compares having faith to doing a trust fall. You’re still afraid, at least until somebody actually does catch you. It’s not about whether you believe they will catch you, because if you didn’t believe that, you wouldn’t be willing to fall in the first place. You first have to absolutely believe that someone will catch you, but you’re still afraid of—what?—giving up control.

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. . . . God, I trust you. But please help me, because it isn’t always easy.

Peter Enns says that most of us trust completely sometimes, but not all the time. And that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with us or that we need to be fixed. That’s just part of the faith journey, like learning to speak the truth in love to one another—and to ourselves—and trusting that God will be with us through that process.

So how does Jesus respond, when his disciples claim that before they can speak the truth in love among themselves, he’ll just have to give them more faith? Here’s verse 6 again: “But the Master said, ‘You don’t need *more* faith. There is no “more” or “less” in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say, the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Go jump in the lake,” and it would do it.’”

We don't need *more* faith—more trust—to comply with the Lord's instructions, but *genuine* faith, genuine trust. It's not the amount that matters; even a mustard seed of faith will do. Okay, here's a question for you: How much does a mustard seed weigh? Well, according to Wikipedia, the source of all online wisdom, one mustard seed weighs 0.000004409 pounds.

Everyone look closely at your mustard seeds. Tiny little buggers, aren't they? But Jesus tells us that if we have that much faith—genuine faith and trust in God—we could say to a mulberry tree, “Go jump in the lake,” and it would do it.

It's not about how much faith or trust we have in God, and it has nothing to do with what we believe in our heads. It's about how genuine and honest our tiny speck of faith really is. And it's okay to say to God, “God, I do trust you. But it's not easy, so I could use a bit of help.” I believe. Help my unbelief. Trust and faith in God is like a muscle—the more we use it, the stronger it gets.

Oh, and here's the kicker about those tiny little seeds. In order to grow into big, beautiful plants, they have to change. They have to give up control and allow the microscopic germ of life deep within to spring forth. Change and control—more words that make us squirm, right? But look what happens when that tiny seed—metaphorically speaking, obviously—has the trust and faith to surrender control and allow change to occur.

The mulberry trees in the Middle East, at the time of Jesus, were black mulberry trees, brought there from Persia some 600 years earlier. They could grow three stories high, and their unusually dense, invasive roots would spread 40 feet in all directions, growing mostly within the top two feet of soil. The roots of a mulberry tree were so extensive and so powerfully entrenched that these trees could live for up to 600 years. In Jesus's culture, it was generally believed that to uproot a mulberry tree was practically impossible. So when Jesus told his disciples that if they had the faith of a mustard seed, they could tell a mulberry tree to go jump in the lake and it would obey, that definitely made an impression on them.

Speaking of roots, Peter Enns also says that most people's spiritual faith is rooted in either fear or trust. If our faith life is rooted in fear of what might happen, then we're asking God to keep that bad thing from happening, rather than trusting God to be with us no matter what happens. We're putting God in a box with a specific task—to prevent *this* from happening and make *that* happen instead. That kind of faith—rooted in anxiety and fear—can engender anger and hostility, whether aimed externally at the world or internally at ourselves.

As Enns says, “The world isn't perfect and never will be, but solving it isn't the point. The point is to trust God enough to live in it.” Trust grows a peaceful life—not necessarily completely happy, but peaceful—and who doesn't want that? Having faith means letting go of control,

letting go of the fear of change, and trusting God. And faith the size of that tiny mustard seed is all that God asks of us.

Praise be to God. Amen.