

***You Must Forgive. Really?***  
**Luke 17:1-6**

**Pastor Wayne Peterson**  
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*Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! <sup>2</sup>It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. <sup>3</sup>Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender; and if there is repentance, you must forgive. <sup>4</sup>And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."*

*<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*

*<sup>6</sup>The Lord replied, "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."*

Jim and Mike knew the rules of the house very well. Among those rules were: pick up your toys, put your dirty dishes in the dishwasher, no eating in the living room, and no playing catch in the house. Just because they knew the rules didn't mean they always remembered to follow them. Therefore, their mom was continually reminding them of the rules, much to their consternation. Teenage boys do not like to have their mothers remind them about anything.

One rainy afternoon, Jim happened to find a ball behind a chair that belonged to his baby sister. And he did what boys tend to do with balls -- he tossed it to his brother, who made a great catch as he dove onto the couch. Mike tossed the ball back and Jim caught it behind his back. Very impressive! He then flicked it back with a behind-the-back toss, and it ricocheted off the big pink table lamp that had belonged to his great grandma. The ball was fine. The lamp wasn't so good. It toppled over the edge of the end table and broke into dozens of pieces on the floor.

Jim and Mike were scared. They knew that if they hadn't been playing catch, the lamp would not be broken. They picked up the pieces, put them in a box and hid it in the storage room under the steps, hoping their mom wouldn't notice that the lamp was missing.

Their plan worked -- for awhile. It was almost a week before their mom paused one evening and said, "Where's grandma's lamp?" Confronted with the evidence, they had no choice but to confess they had broken the lamp.

**Question:** *Was the sincerity of Jim & Mike's confession and their expression of sorrow for their action any less real because they didn't come forward voluntarily, but only acknowledged their guilt when they had no other choice? Should their mom's forgiveness be conditional upon her evaluating their sincerity?*

Michelle began drinking alcohol when she was fourteen. By the time she was eighteen she was an chemically dependent. By the time she was 23 she had been in treatment programs on three occasions. Each time, she begged forgiveness from her family for the pain they had endured because of her drinking. She promised that things would be different from now on. She'd get a job, she would go to AA meetings twice a week, she would pay back the thousands of dollars they had spent on her treatment programs.

**Question:** *Is Michelle crying crocodile tears, saying what she thinks her family wants to hear but not really meaning it? Is her family doing her a favor by saying they forgive her and will work with her to turn her life around? Is it possible Michelle is sincere in her contrition even though past experience would predict that it is likely she will return to drinking?*

“Be on your guard!” says Jesus. “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times in a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

This forgiveness stuff is hard, isn't it! Discussion and debate about confession and forgiveness has been frequent this past year in light of the scandal involving Tiger Woods. I have heard people make the following remarks on radio or TV: “His apology didn't seem sincere enough.” “I don't think he should be forgiven because he didn't confess until the information was public and he had no other choice.” “It's obvious he isn't sincere because he has demonstrated the same behavior again and again.”

These comments concern me because they assume that forgiveness is conditional upon whether we are sincere or contrite enough and whether or not the sin is ever committed again. Now that seems reasonable when we apply it to someone else, but we find it to be a dangerous trap when we apply it to ourselves. It is a fact of human nature that we always have mixed motives in whatever we do. How can we be sure that we are sincere enough to qualify for forgiveness, whether the forgiveness is from God or from another individual? Who can say with absolute certainty that we will never again commit that same sin?

No one can say that. That's why this forgiveness stuff is so hard. That's why, after Jesus tells the disciples that forgiveness is to be a distinguishing mark of their community, even to the point of forgiving a person seven times in one day, that the disciples plead to him, “Lord, increase our faith! Give us the faith necessary to be so forgiving.” Jesus responds by saying, “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.”

You might be thinking, “I thought the saying was if you had faith you could move a mountain?” You would be right, for that is how the saying reads in Matthew's gospel. But moving a mulberry tree is just as impossible as moving a mountain, for its root system is so extensive that the roots can spread out twenty yards in each direction. The point is that no one, by themselves, can uproot a mulberry tree or move a mountain. But with faith, says Jesus, one can do the impossible.

It would seem that Jesus is reprimanding his disciples for not having enough faith -- “You can't forgive someone? Why, if you only had a little bit of faith, as much as a mustard seed, you could do this and more.” If not a reprimand, we might surmise that Jesus is exhorting the disciples -- “You've just got to work at your faith a little harder. You've got to believe more fervently, practice positive thinking, generate some positive mental energy.”

In this scenario, Jesus would be giving the disciples a version of the story “The Little Engine That Could”, the children’s story about the little steam engine who faces the impossible task of pulling a train so long that the new, powerful diesel locomotives could not even handle the job. But as he struggles up the hill the little engine puffs, “I think I can, I think I can” and with a last surge of energy he gets over the top of the hill and then proudly puffs “I knew I could, I knew I could.”

If we understand Jesus as exhorting the disciples to have more faith, the message we would probably take from this saying about the mustard seed is: “No matter what the size of the challenges you encounter in life, work hard, believe in yourself and in the worthiness of your goal, and you can do it.”

This might be an inspiring message for some and in some situations it is very good advice. Indeed, you can go to a bookstore and find all manner of motivational books that carry this message, but it turns out that this is not what Jesus is saying in this passage. This is one of those instances where it is important to have a good Bible commentary close at hand to clarify something that does not translate well into English.

In the Greek language, in which the New Testament was written, there are two types of “if” clauses. The first is called a condition “contrary to fact”. We might begin a sentence saying, “Well, if I were you...” Obviously, I am not you, so that is contrary to fact.

The second type of “if” clause is called a condition “according to fact”. We might begin a sentence saying “If you are human...” We are all human, so that phrase is according to fact.

This little grammar lesson may seem boring, but it is very important for understanding this passage. Jesus is here using an “if” clause that is according to fact. He is not saying “If you had faith (and you obviously don’t).” He is instead saying “If you had faith (and you obviously do).”

Rather than reprimanding or exhorting the disciples, Jesus is affirming the faith they already have. He is giving them a word of assurance that they need not go on a desperate quest for “more” faith, as if faith could be quantified or possessed.

Faith is not the same thing as intensely believing something.

Faith is not the same thing as positive thinking.

Faith is not something we manufacture or find deep within ourselves.

Faith is always faith “in God”. It is a confident reliance on God that God will keep his promises. Faith is therefore something God gives to us by showing us time and again throughout history that he is reliable, that his promise can be trusted, and that we can confidently place our lives in his care.

God planted this faith within us in baptism by joining us to the history of his people. That’s why in the baptismal service we recall stories of God’s faithfulness -- creation, Noah and the flood, the Exodus, and the resurrection of Jesus. God’s action in the past gives us faith in him in the present. We know God is trustworthy.

The seed of faith planted in baptism is then nourished by hearing God's word and sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion. We don't get "more" faith, but our faith is strengthened and deepened by worshiping with the community of faith, a community God has gathered together by his acts of steadfast love throughout history.

As with the disciples, Jesus affirms our faith today. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed (and you do! -- God has given it to you), you can do the impossible. You can even forgive someone who has sinned again and again and whose contrition may appear not to be wholly sincere. That's because forgiveness is not dependent on the sincerity of the one doing the confessing, but upon the love and forbearing of the one doing the forgiving.

At the beginning of worship this morning, Pastor Chris led us in Confession & Forgiveness. As we spoke the words of confession, Pastor Chris was not looking over the congregation trying to ascertain who were sincere in their confession and who were just going through the motions, perhaps thinking about what they'd be doing this afternoon or trying to stifle a yawn. And yet, Pastor Chris confidently and authoritatively announced to everyone present that their sins are forgiven. Why could she do that? She could do that because in Jesus Christ, God has made the unilateral decision to forgive us. God made that decision, so we're just going to have to live with it.

As hard as it is to do at times, you can forgive others as God continues to forgive you. You can do this difficult thing not because you are doing this yourself, but because your faith is faith in God, and for God, nothing is impossible.