

Luke 17:5-10  
2 Timothy 1:1-14  
October 2, 2022

## Increase Our Faith

Sometimes teachers are interesting in the way they ask and answer questions. One of my seminary professors would ask open-ended questions that *could* have several right answers, but he had one in mind that he seemed to be hoping someone would guess.

“Yees,” he would say, “that is not quite what I am thinking of,” and sometimes the students would become frustrated and request that he just tell them the answer instead of playing the frustrating game of trying to guess and not succeeding.

You have heard that there is no such thing as a silly question . . . but it is not really true. It is just being polite. When it occurs, there are multiple strategies. sometimes the answer may be, a “silly question deserves and silly answer,” kind of response. There might be a slight chastisement, or maybe a polite refusal to answer.

And then there is the hostile witness answer when the teacher decides to muddy the waters instead of clear them up, as if to say that there are some things the students should be able to figure out on their own.

Jesus was called Rabbi, which means, “teacher.” He used multiple strategies. When we read the gospels, we very often see the apostles not looking so good,

like when Jesus told his followers that the Son of Man would suffer, be arrested, beaten, and executed, and they turned around and asked which one of them would sit at his right hand in his kingdom.

The apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith . . .” He told them that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would say to the mulberry tree, “be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey. It almost like a football team asking the strength coach to help them get stronger, and receiving the reply that if they were strong they could pick up a car and throw it into a pond. It is an interesting image, but not really an answer to their request.

And then Jesus goes on to explain that servants are servants for a reason and shouldn’t expect to be thanked for their service or all that much rewarded for doing their job. It is an interesting thing to say and I have known others who said the same thing, but I am not sure it answers the request, which, on its face seems to be a good one . . . “Increase our faith,” they said, and one is not inclined to think less of them for asking it.

Time and again I have found myself unfaithful in a variety of different ways. I hear the words of Jesus to Thomas near the end of the Gospel of John, “Stop being faithless,” or sometimes the way it is translated, “Stop doubting and believe,” and wonder If I could do better than Thomas, though I am trying to believe without seeing what Thomas saw, the freshly wounded hands and feet of Jesus. I am challenged to

increase my own faith, and I wonder if that is the answer, “increase your *own* faith.”

In the 2nd Chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians we read, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed . . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

Sometimes the answer to our pleas for help is, “do it yourself.” And then when we look back with the benefit of hindsight we see how God has helped, lifted us up, indeed increased our faith.

We live in a time when followers of Jesus sometimes don’t look much better in their situation than the apostles did in theirs. There are all kinds of reasons for this, I do not think it is necessary to list them. One striking feature of some contemporary Christians is that they have noticed an adversarial relationship with the world. We speak of that from time to time. Some have a chip on their shoulder about it.

Once chips get planted on shoulders, they are hard to remove. It takes faith removes them. Jesus might say, “If you had faith like a small seed, you would be able to say to the chip on your shoulder, ‘remove hence to yonder place,’ and it would be moved like the Mulberry Tree that Jesus mentioned.

I think of Paul near the end of his life when he wrote what we call the pastorals, that is, the letters to Timothy and Titus in which he gave them pastoral

encouragement and advice. Paul knew what it was like to have people in opposition to him. As he wrote in 2 Corinthians;

He had, “been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received . . . forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked . . . 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. . .

I don’t want to say that he took it the way the Buckeyes take the Team Up North, as a friendly competition, but he didn’t get too down about it. Just listen again to what he said to Timothy;

“So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. 9 He 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. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the

gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him against that day.”

And we can also have that faith; even in a world that has in it the trouble with which we are confronted daily. And all of our neighbors too, the believers and the ones who do not believe; they all together suffer the wars and hurricanes, the pandemics and the inflationary trends, and all the vicissitudes of daily life like us, and can be helped by these encouraging words, as can we, that grace has been given from the beginning of time, that death has been defeated and life and immortality have been brought to light, and that we all too, can be convinced that Christ is able, to guard what we have entrusted to him, which is our very souls, our very lives, against that Day . . .

Lord Jesus, we go outside and see the beauty of the coming fall and enjoy the temperatures that are not too hot nor too cold. We have enjoyed life in all its wonder.

We also see the trouble that is around us, and sometimes not too far away, sometimes it comes to us. Never let us fail to notice the way you have taught us to trust that you are with us wherever we may be, and whatever are the circumstances.

May we always have a kind of solidarity with the suffering of the people in poverty, or in a war zone, or in the aftermath of a hurricane, or when they have known rejection or even persecution because of your name. Do not let us have solidarity with their bitterness and rage, with their violence, with their unbelief and disobedience to your command to love.

Rather, teach us to be compassionate and kind. And even when we are helpless and obstinate, in every situation help us to ask after the apostles,

O Lord, increase our faith.

And then as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, will and act in us according to your good purpose. Amen.

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