

# Faith and Duty

2 Kings 5:9-17, Luke 17:1-19 (ESV)

September 18, 2005

“Increase our faith!” That is what the apostles asked of the Lord: “Increase our faith!” The first twelve, the chosen, recipients of power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, who were soon enough to sit at table with him and receive the new covenant, the apostles asked of the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The first thing this makes me think is that if they needed more faith, how much more do I need more faith! And I want to come back to that at the end, but it is not the best place to begin. Let us begin instead with the simple, straightforward request of the apostles, “Increase our faith!”

We need to look at both the content and the context. Part of the content is the assumption and therefore the affirmation that the apostles already have some faith. It may not be much, but they already have some faith. It may not be what they want it to be, and it may not be what God wants it to be, but they already have some faith. That is clear. Apart from this reality, the request would make no sense at all. Even though this is the first time in the Gospel according to Luke that the word “faith” has been applied to the apostles, except when Jesus asked the disciples, after he calmed a storm at sea, “Where is your faith?”, nevertheless this very request on the part of the apostles to increase their faith both assumes and therefore affirms that they already have some faith in God and also in his Christ.

In fact, if we consider to whom their request is addressed, that strengthens this conclusion even more. The apostles addressed their request for increased faith to Jesus. They were talking to him. But faith, of course, is a gift from God. It is not a human accomplishment. It is not a human gift. To ask Jesus for faith or even for an increase in faith is to acknowledge that Jesus acts on behalf of God and, indeed, that he is God. The simple request, “Increase our faith!”, is nothing less than a prayer, and not a bad one to make our own. Prayers are addressed to God. That this one is addressed to Jesus already indicates faith not only in God but also and especially in Jesus, the Son of God, God himself with us and for us. They may not have understood this entirely. They were, after all, asking for an increase in faith. But at this point, on the way to Jerusalem, between the manger and the cross, at least they had enough faith to ask Jesus to increase their faith. And maybe that is enough. If we have enough faith to ask for more faith, maybe that in and of itself is saving faith. Lord, help us! The day we are content with our faith is the day we are in a lot of trouble.

It is no accident that as Luke records the story for us he does not use the name of Jesus in this sentence but uses a title for him: “The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” This is not a part of their request, but it is certainly a part of their faith and understanding, and Luke has recorded it for it to become part of our faith and understanding. At one level, the word “Lord” could be used when speaking to someone, not unlike the way we use the word “Sir” today. And at another level, the word “Lord” could indicate a man of high rank and power. But throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the word “Lord” is used as a title for God Almighty, and its application to Jesus here and throughout the New Testament indicates nothing less than that Jesus is God Almighty with us and for us. Thanks be to God!

Beyond the content and the addressee of this request, the immediate context is also of great importance. It was immediately after the teachings on temptation and forgiveness that the apostles asked for an increase in faith. Jesus said to his disciples, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” It was then that the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” It was then that they knew they needed some help. Forgiveness seven times a day? Every day? Day after day? For the rest of our lives? Can this be for real? “Increase our faith!” Worshiping God is one thing. Forgiving your brother is quite another. At least, we would like for it to be quite another. Somehow, Jesus ties these together in a knot so tight that we cannot undo it. Loving and serving God not only leads to loving and forgiving brother; loving and serving God also requires, and indeed cannot exist without, loving and forgiving brother. The two go together. No wonder the apostles prayed, “Increase our faith!”

Of course, the two belong together in the other direction, also. True love of neighbor requires, and cannot exist without, love of God. Apart from the knowledge and love of God, there may be some modicum of care for neighbor, some common humanity, some shared sympathy, but not the true love to which we are called. In fact, apart from the knowledge and love of God, there may be no love for neighbor, but only fear, contempt, disrespect, and disregard. But only with the knowledge and love of God are we even remotely capable of knowing others as creatures of God, as children of God, as loved ones of God, as forgiven sinners, and as ones for whom Christ died. Apart from the knowledge and love of God, such true knowledge and love of neighbor is simply impossible. So, just as we cannot love God without loving neighbor, we cannot love neighbor without loving God. The two go together. Again, no wonder the apostles prayed, “Increase our faith!” They needed more faith in order to be able to forgive. They also needed to forgive in order to be able to have more faith.

The answer Jesus gives to their prayer request seems a strange one. 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.” Whatever else that means, it at least means that even the tiniest amount of faith is capable of great and wonderful things. It occurs to me that it might take a lot more faith to forgive one’s brother seven times a day than to move a tree into the ocean, but even the tiniest amount is headed in the right direction. And with an increase, we might even acknowledge the risen and living Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Immediately after this teaching about faith, Jesus goes into a discourse about the nature of Christian duty. Again, the two go together. “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” That is to say, God does not owe us anything. We might think that God owes us everything, but God does not owe us anything. We belong to God. If we do anything for God, that is what we are supposed to do, and we earn no special favor by doing it.

This conjunction of faith and duty suggests, among other things, that faith leads to duty, that faith is at least part of our duty, and that duty cannot be fulfilled without faith, just as faith is not faith if it does not lead to obedience. The Christian faith, faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, calls us to a life of glorifying and serving God, a life of worship and of work, a life of praise and of good works. This is who we are. This is why we were created. This is why we are here. This is what we are all about.

At the same time, the Christian life is not merely one of duty, or even one of only faith and duty. We are also recipients of grace, and therefore our lives are intended for gratitude. This is what we see in the healing of the lepers. Jesus had set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem, the city that did not know the things that make for peace, the city that did not know the time of its visitation by the Son of God, the city known for killing the prophets who spoke the word of God, the city which would, in fact, kill Jesus. It was on this journey to the cross that Jesus was met by ten lepers who cried out to him for mercy. Jesus extended his mercy to them, healed the ten, and one came back to praise God and to give thanks to Jesus Christ.

What is going on here? Not only was leprosy physically horrible, but also the people who had this disease were, by law and custom, regarded as ritually unclean, religiously cursed, and therefore socially outcast. In their hour of greatest need, they could not enter the temple, could not attend or participate in worship, could not live

inside the city limits, and could not be touched by another person, because of the ritual uncleanness. The lepers were no longer a part of the human family. They were as good as dead. This is why they stood at a distance and cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Heal us, make us whole, restore us to life, and reunite us with the great human family!

Jesus sent them to the priests. Why? The priests were entrusted with determining who had leprosy and who did not, who was clean and who was unclean. The priests held the key to the door of reentry into the human community, into the exercise of faith and worship. “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” Jesus said. And away they went. But here is something very peculiar. Jesus did not heal them before he sent them away. He sent them away first, and then they were healed on the way. All ten obeyed Jesus and went to see the priests. With sores on their arms, they went to the priests to be declared clean! What a wonderful confidence in the word of God.

One returned praising God and thanking Jesus. The one was not more obedient than the nine, the one was no more clean than the nine, but the one was more grateful than the other nine put together! And this gratitude is the main goal of God’s grace. The one former leper who returned was also a foreigner, a Samaritan, a people hated and despised ethnically, nationally, and religiously by the people of Israel. This one was a double outsider, a leper and a foreigner, and he outshone the nine sons of Israel who also had been healed.

Of all the ten who were healed, the one who returned to give thanks was the only one who put his healing to good use. He returned, praising God with a loud voice, fell on his face at Jesus’ feet (that posture is an act of worship in and of itself), and gave Jesus thanks. To the one who returned it was given to know that the wonderful power of God Almighty which we know as grace was at work in a unique way in the person, ministry, and teaching of Jesus Christ, both to heal the individual and so to make the community whole again, and this healing grace elicited from him a profound, joyous, and overflowing gratitude.

This story has been preserved for two-thousand years now for your sake and mine, in order that we may know the grace of God Almighty in our own lives and in order that we may respond with the appropriate gratitude. It is the goal of grace to elicit gratitude from us. What good did it do, in the grand scheme of things, for the other nine lepers to be healed, if they missed a chance to worship God, neglected their opportunity to thank Jesus Christ, and returned to their normal pre-leprous lives— perhaps good, useful, productive, and happy lives, in and of themselves— but missed a chance to converse and commune with their Lord and Master, to praise their maker and redeemer? And what good would it do for us, if we were to fail to realize that this story is for, and even about, us here today. We have all been created

in the image of God; we have been given life and breath; we have been forgiven of our sin; we have been redeemed by the mighty work of Christ on the cross; we have been pursued by the relentless love of God which always seeks us out and always finds us, no matter how far we might have run, how hard we might have struggled, or how deeply we might have hidden. God has healed us of our disease, so that we may return here this morning for the high and holy privilege of praising God and giving God our thanks.

The grace of God is at work in Jesus Christ to regather us into a community of gratitude toward God. God, whose majesty is beyond our comprehension, whose holiness and power are such that to glimpse them would be fatal, the Lord of heaven and earth, has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ. God, for the sake of his own glory, has reclaimed us from all the false claims that the powers of the world make on us, reversed our stubborn march into oblivion, and recalled us as God's own people. This is why God has gathered us here. We do not come by virtue of our own decision or by the strength of our own effort alone. We are called by the word of God, carried by the hand of God, brought by the grace of God, here, today, to be God's people in this time and in this place.

The next move is ours. Do we live thankless lives, or do we come back to worship and give thanks? When our lives have been lived and all is said and done, will Jesus Christ look around and have to say of us, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?" Or will he be able to say even to us, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well"? So it is that Luke has recorded the apostles' prayer in order that we might make it our own: "Increase our faith!"

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220  
[www.grace-covenant.org](http://www.grace-covenant.org)