

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

MORE FAITH OR MORE OBEDIENCE?

Luke 17:5-10

By

Steven J. Cole

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Luke Lesson 78

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If you read the Bible with a sensitive heart, you will often be overwhelmed with the great difficulty of many of its commands: "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). The list could go on and on. How can we possibly obey these seemingly impossible commands of Scripture?

The disciples felt overwhelmed by Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:1-4. He told them to be on guard so that they would not cause any young believers in Him to stumble. And He said that if their brother sinned, they were to rebuke him and if he repented they were to forgive him, no matter how often the cycle was repeated. The disciples instantly realized that these were tough demands. To walk uprightly so as not to cause a new believer to stumble and to forgive someone who has wronged us are not automatic behaviors! Forgiveness especially is tough because our feelings are involved. So the disciples respond by asking the Lord to increase their faith (17:5). It was an honest request stemming from the right motives. They saw that if they wanted to fulfill these demands, they would have to have God's strength and enabling to do it.

But Jesus' answer (17:6) indicates that more faith is not really the issue. Faith is not measured by its quantity, but simply by its presence. A mustard seed sized faith will accomplish impossible things. The real need, Jesus says (17:7-10), is for more obedience and humility. We should view ourselves as God's slaves who owe Him simple and unquestioning obedience. And, when we have done what He requires, we should not get puffed up with pride in our great obedience, but should simply say, "We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done." Thus ...

When we encounter the difficult commands of Scripture,
we should not focus on more faith,
but on more obedience and humility.

In taking this approach to the text, I am differing with three men of God whom I greatly respect, Charles Simeon, Charles Spurgeon and J. C. Ryle. These men treat the apostles' request to the Lord, "Increase our faith," as a positive model that we should follow. There is no question that the Bible encourages us to be strong in faith, growing in our faith to the point that we implicitly trust in God and His promises. I hope that nothing I say discourages anyone from growing in faith, without which it is impossible to please God. Everything we do must stem from faith or it is sin (Rom. 14:23). I would agree with these men that the prayer for more faith is one that we should often bring before God.

But in this context, it seems to me that Jesus is offering a gentle correction to the disciples' request, not a commendation of it. He is saying, "Don't wait around for increased faith. Just a small amount of genuine faith can accomplish what is humanly impossible. Rather, focus on your duty to obey God and, when you have obeyed, don't start thinking that you're really something. Keep in mind at all times that you are just an unworthy slave who has done what was required of him."

1. When we encounter the difficult commands of Scripture, our focus should not be on more faith.

At first, this sounds like heresy! Aren't Christians supposed to be people of faith? Shouldn't we be growing in faith? From cover to cover, the Bible rebukes unbelief and encourages faith. So why did Jesus answer as He did?

A. The idea of "more faith" exalts man, not God.

Doesn't it? Stop and think about it. Have you ever had someone say to you, "I wish I could believe in Christ as you do, but I just don't have as much faith as you have"? And you clear your throat and modestly say, "Aw, shucks, it's nothing, really!" Who gets the glory there? *You do!* You're the one with such great faith; the focus is on you.

Or, have you ever heard of a great Christian leader referred to as a man of great faith? Who gets the glory? The man of great

faith gets the glory! And all the rest of us sigh and think, "I wish I could have such faith!" But that's the wrong emphasis.

There is a sense in which there is no such thing as great faith; there is only faith or no faith. I realize that on two occasions Jesus commended people for their great faith (Matt. 8:10, the centurion; Matt. 15:28, the Syrophenician woman). And, He often chastised the disciples because of their little faith (Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). But in each case, He was commending a person who simply took God at His word and He was chastising men who did not believe God concerning the matter at hand. So the matter is not so much great faith in God, but rather faith in a great God. The smallest amount of faith links us to Christ, who is mighty.

For example, suppose that I tell you that I demonstrated great faith by driving my car over the Golden Gate Bridge. You would say to me, "That didn't take great faith because it is a solid bridge that has carried the weight of millions of cars and trucks over the years." To be sure, it takes faith to drive over the bridge, because you are committing your life to the ability of that bridge to bear the weight of your car. But it doesn't require *great* faith, because that bridge has been proven to be trustworthy.

There may be someone who has a fear of heights and a phobia about bridges, and he edges his car out onto the Golden Gate at five miles per hour, fearing greatly that the bridge will collapse. But that's all the faith it takes to get him across, although his journey may not be too pleasant. On the other hand, you may have a daring person who comes to a rickety old bridge that looks like it's about to fall down. With great bravado, he guns his engine and drives his car across. You could say that he has great faith, but I would say that he is greatly stupid to commit his life to such an untrustworthy object. Maybe he can boast in his great faith. But no one can boast in great faith when the object is proven to be trustworthy.

There is no more trustworthy being in the universe than the living God! He has a track record of never failing anyone who trusted in Him throughout human history. Either we take Him at His word or we don't. If we do trust Him, it is no credit to us. All it takes is a little grain of faith in Him, because the issue is not our

great faith but our great God. Thus, I argue that the concept of "great faith" exalts man.

B. True faith exalts God, not man.

Jesus' point is that it is not a matter of *how much* faith you have, but rather, do you have faith in the living God? If so, it can accomplish great things, not because of the size of your faith, but because of the power and ability of your God. He will do mighty things through the person who trusts in Him, even if their faith is seemingly small and weak. Then the glory goes to God.

Two weeks ago, Bob and Arlene Powers and I were seated on a 747 waiting to take off from Minneapolis to Amsterdam when the pilot came on the intercom and informed us that our take off would be delayed because of an electrical problem. He assured us that they would not take off until everything was in proper working condition. So we sat there and watched as a team of mechanics searched the cabin for the source of the problem.

Well, this was too much for one young woman on board. With obvious anxiety, she told the stewardess near me that she could not fly on this plane, and she asked to be escorted off. The stewardess suggested that she talk to the pilot, and took her forward, along with her boyfriend or husband. But to my knowledge, they never came back to their seats. She simply lacked the faith to fly on that plane. But the mechanics found the problem, fixed it, and, an hour late, we took off and landed safely in Amsterdam.

I'll be the first to grant that airplanes are made, maintained, and flown by fallible humans, and so there is the risk that they will crash. But, generally they have a safe track record and thus are worthy of our trust. If that anxious woman had just been able to have enough faith to stay on board, she would have safely reached her destination. She could have reviewed in her mind the safety record of the major airlines. She could have reminded herself of the fact that the pilot himself and the flight attendants were committing their own lives to the safety of that aircraft. Just a small amount of faith and she would have been able later to say, "My doubts were unfounded. That plane and that pilot were trustworthy." But her lack of faith really was saying, "I don't trust the

competency of these mechanics or of the pilot.” It detracted from the “glory” or commendation that they deserved.

Even so, a lack of faith detracts from God’s glory, whereas just a small amount of faith—enough to get on board—exalts God as the faithful and powerful God that He is. How much more trustworthy is the living God than a fallible airplane and human pilot! Even when Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians and the temple was in ruins, Jeremiah could rightly say, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:21-23).

How does this apply to the matter at hand, that of trusting God when we’re faced with the difficult commands of Scripture? To use the example of verse 4, suppose that someone has wronged you and has asked for your forgiveness, but you are deeply hurt and you’re struggling with obeying God by granting forgiveness. Maybe the root of bitterness is as entrenched as the roots of this mulberry tree.

How much faith do you need to forgive the other person? Isn’t the answer, “As much faith as it takes to believe that God has forgiven you”? So you can pray, “Lord, I’m having difficulty obeying You by forgiving my brother. But I know that I have trusted in You to forgive my sins. I know that You did it, not because of me or my great faith, but because You are the faithful God who keeps His promises. I glorify You for Your great mercy towards me. I ask You now to be glorified through me by enabling me to forgive this person who has wronged me. Uproot this bitterness from my heart and plant it in the sea.” By getting your eyes off of you and your faith and onto God and His great mercy and faithfulness, you glorify Him. Even if your faith is as small as a mustard seed, God can uproot your bitterness and bury it forever, and He then gets the glory.

When Jesus uses the analogy of commanding a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, He is not suggesting that we should go around doing such things literally. Rather, He is using such a graphic illustration to say that even small faith can do what is humanly impossible because it is none other than Almighty God who works through our faith. Everyone who has truly believed in

Christ for salvation has enough faith to obey the most difficult commands of Scripture, because the issue isn't our great faith. The issue is our great God. Look to Him and He will be glorified as He works His mighty power through your weakness and small faith.

But Jesus goes on (17:7-10) to tell a parable that shifts the focus from faith to obedience and humility.

2. When we encounter the difficult commands of Scripture, our focus should be on more obedience and humility.

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, put his finger on the issue when he wrote, "It is hard to believe, not because it is hard to understand, but because it is hard to obey." If we focus on increasing our faith, we will get inflated notions of our role. Even if we focus on obedience, we can easily get puffed up with how noble we are to be so obedient. So the Lord instructs us to view ourselves as God's slaves who owe Him obedience in all things and who are unworthy of any of His blessings.

- A. We should view ourselves as God's slaves who owe Him obedience in all things.

Jesus is using humor here to make a point. In that culture, slaves had a very simple job description: Do everything your master commands. Period! Slaves did not give orders; they took orders. They did not negotiate with the owner what their privileges and perks would be. They didn't join slave unions to get better working conditions or wages. They were not free to say, "I don't like that order, so I'm not going to do it." Slaves had to obey.

Thus when they came in after a hard day in the fields, they did not expect their owners to have dinner ready for them. They couldn't tell the owner, "I've had a rough day. Get your own dinner!" They expected to come in and serve their master. And they didn't expect him to be profuse in thanking them for all their trouble. It was their duty to serve him. Only after that could they eat their own dinner.

Duty is not the only picture. In Luke 12:37, Jesus showed us how He as the Master would graciously reverse roles and wait upon His faithful servants. The focus there was on His grace. But here He is emphasizing our responsibility to do what He commands us to do. Our focus cannot be on our feelings, but rather we must

focus on our duty. I can't picture the tired and dirty slave coming in off the field *feeling* like getting his master's dinner. He felt like taking a bath and being served a nice dinner. But he had to focus on his duty as a slave.

We live in a day that encourages us to focus on our feelings. We're even encouraged to rage against God when we feel angry because of how He has treated us! I realize that the psalmist sometimes poured out his complaint before the Lord, and I'm not suggesting that we deny or suppress our feelings. But there is a right and a wrong way to let the Sovereign of the universe know how we feel! We need to remember at all times our lowly position before Him. We are but dust and ashes in His presence. He owes us nothing; we owe Him everything. He does not owe us; He owns us as His slaves. As such, we owe Him obedience, even when His commands seem difficult.

There is no praise or glory in doing your duty. Duty is that which is expected of a person. I would venture to say that if you show up at work on time, your boss does not say, "Thank you so much for being here on time! It's just wonderful how you do that day after day!" You're expected to be at work on time. It's your duty. You don't crow about paying your bills, do you? You owe that money; you are expected to pay. The point is, we don't earn brownie points with God for doing what He has commanded us to do. It's expected for slaves to do what the master commands.

But, because of the human propensity toward pride, we're all prone to get puffed up when we do our duty, especially if we start thinking how difficult it was. We think, "I'm so spiritual! I forgave my brother seven times yesterday!" Thus Jesus shows us that ...

- B. We should view ourselves as God's slaves who are unworthy of any of His blessings.

Jesus concludes (17:10), "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" Spurgeon says that the Lord here is pouring cold water down our backs, but it is therapeutic. We need that dousing to remember our place before Him. Sometimes we get so puffed up about our years of sacrificial service or our forgiving spirit that we almost think that God

owes us something. But we have no claim on God. All that we have, we have received by grace. We were lost and on the fast lane to hell when God's mercy rescued us. He graciously gave us the privilege of serving Him. Are we then to congratulate ourselves when we obey His commands?

The Bible no where tells us that we need to grow in self-esteem, but many times it exhorts us to grow in humility. Even when we obey the most difficult commands in the Bible, we are to say of ourselves, "I am just an unworthy slave who only did that which I ought to have done." If you struggle with pride (and who doesn't?), I commend to you Andrew Murray's little booklet, *Humility* (Christian Literature Crusade, available on our book table). You can read it in a couple of hours, but there is a lifetime of application there!

The Navigators are well known for their stress on having a servant attitude. A businessman once asked Lorne Sanny, the president of the Navigators, how he could know when he had a servant attitude. Sanny replied, "By how you act when your are treated like one." When someone treats you like a servant, do you get offended and say, "I deserve better treatment than this?" Or, do you say, "I just got treated better than I should, because I'm not just a servant; I'm an *unworthy* servant"?

Conclusion

God's way of motivating us toward obedience and humility is to keep us focused on the cross of Jesus Christ. As Paul said, "the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). "May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). Or, as Isaac Watts put it,

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

If you're struggling with some difficult command that you know God wants you to obey, look to the cross, where Jesus gave Himself for you. That is one reason our Lord ordained that we

come often to His Table, to remember Him and His sacrificial death for us. In light of that, is any demand He makes of us too difficult? As we come to His Table, let's exercise the simple faith that His faithfulness calls forth. And let's focus on greater obedience and humility as His unworthy slaves.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the focus on more faith is wrong in that it exalts man? How do you harmonize this with Matt. 8:10 & 15:28 and with Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8?
2. How would you counsel a believer who excused his disobedience by saying, "I just don't have the faith to do it"?
3. Is the concept of obedience out of duty at odds with the concept of obedience out of love? If so, how? If not, how do they harmonize?
4. A person says, "To obey God when you don't feel like it is hypocrisy." Your response?

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