

October 5, 2025

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Impossible Forgiveness”

Luke 17:1-10

Certain Bible verses are prone to being pulled out of their context, quoted, and then abused. We have one of those before us in Luke 17:6. *“And 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.’”*

Standing alone, this statement brings all sorts of cool possibilities to mind, doesn’t it? Absent any context, you’d think Jesus was speaking specifically about the power of faith. Many false teachers have then twisted this to claim if you just have enough faith, believe enough that Jesus will deliver what you desire, then it will happen. So long as your desires are not sinful, God will grant those desires to those of great faith.

But in context, what is Jesus talking about? Jesus has just warned His disciples of the dire consequences of tempting the “little ones” toward sin. Then He proclaims the necessity of full and continual forgiveness of others: *“Pay attention to yourselves! 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 is after this statement that His apostles plead, *“Increase our faith!”* and then Jesus speaks of faith like the grain of a mustard seed.

In context that faith like a mustard seed statement has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with a believer doing spectacular works like telekinetically throwing trees around or accomplishing our own big desires in life or even doing works for God that look great in the eyes of man. This is aimed at forgiveness; the impossible work of forgiving someone who sins against you seven times in a day. That is the context.

Think about how impossible that is for us! I mean, I have a little pet peeve I picked up from my mother screaming at us kids if we left the door of our house open in the summer. “What, are you trying to cool the whole neighborhood????!!” she would scream. Thus today, when my beautiful wife Bridgette leaves the door open for a thirty-second trip to get something on the back porch, it drives me up a wall. If she did that seven times in a day I’d start losing it, and that’s not even a sin! Someone lying to us or stealing from us or insulting us or assaulting us just once is cause for our anger, but just once we’re very likely to forgive when they repent. But by the third time in a single day, that anger isn’t going away so quickly and the forgiveness is not easily forthcoming. By the seventh time we’re done with them. And if it’s seven times a day, day after day, whose up for that forgiveness?

Yeah. It’s no wonder the apostles cry out *“Increase our faith!”* We wish this were one of those places where Jesus’ teaching is kind of hazy or uncertain so we’d have some wiggle room. But this is crystal clear here. Jesus calls on us to have continual forgiveness, no matter how often we are sinned against.

This is why Jesus speaks of the mulberry tree; of faith being able to do that which is impossible. Faith can do this impossible forgiveness. But to understand how, you have to understand a couple key truths about faith.

First, faith is a gift of God. We mess this up a lot. Lutherans have this bad habit of thinking faith is a good work of ours that we should somehow gin up by our own power and make it strong enough to do great things. Wrong. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is by

God's power, God's grace, that you are enabled to do the impossible; continual forgiveness. On the "me" side of this equation it will be struggle, doubt, even refusal. But surrendering to the Jesus side of things by faith, it will be humility, grace, and forgiveness—godly gifts.

And that leads right into the second truth about faith. Faith has an object. The object of our faith is the crucified and risen Christ. And faith, even faith the size of a mustard seed, receives the full gift of His grace flowing from the cross, the flood of complete, never-ending forgiveness. When you understand how often, how many times a day you're pardoned for your sins against Christ, your faith in His mercy makes it real tough to withhold that same mercy from another.

Each of your sins is an offense against Christ. He wore those sins and suffered for each one under the Father's wrath on the cross. Would anyone here be comfortable with Jesus giving up and calling it quits after your seventh sin of the day; sins of deed, word, thought? I wouldn't even make it through my first cup of coffee reading the news!

So we also cry, "Increase our faith!" And while yes, we call for a faith that enables us to continually forgive others in mercy and love like Jesus, at the core this is a request that the Holy Spirit increase our faith to continually realize the depth of our own sin and see how great is the forgiveness of Christ Jesus upon us. The faith grasping this reality receives His grace, a grace that overflows upon us and in reaction upon those who sin against us.

And again, it is true that the very fiber of our fallen being has a real tough time rendering this continual, selfless forgiveness. I wish I could be so filled with the Holy Spirit that this type of loving mercy would come naturally to me. But that's not going to happen in this life. It's beyond us. If the pope were to kick Mother Theresa in the shin four times in a day, by the fifth time she's kicking him back. That's just how we are.

I think this is why Jesus finishes this teaching with the bit about the servant. We know Jesus is our Lord and master because He has "purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil...that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." This is most certainly true. So Jesus makes it clear this is our duty. *"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.'"*

Because we stand forgiven, we have a duty to forgive. When we fail to forgive we need to repent...and be forgiven again...and then forgive. Yes, we are unworthy servants because we don't do this well. Yet we are still the Lord's servants, because He has done all things well in serving us unto salvation!

A very simple teaching. A very clear teaching. A very tough teaching. Yet a very wonderful teaching because forgiveness is the center of this teaching and forgiveness is our greatest need and Christ's greatest free gift.

So yes, dear Lord, increase our faith. Send the Holy Spirit to open our eyes wider and wider that we may see our Savior more and more clearly and in that, be enabled to do what is impossible without Him; forgive always as He always forgives.

Amen.