

Text: Matthew 8:5-13 and Matthew 17:14-20

Theme: How Much Faith Do We Need?

Sermon delivered by Iyabo Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 05/08/2018 at 10.30am

Question: “What does it mean to have mustard seed faith?”

Answer: Faith is so vital to the Christian life that Scripture tells us that, without it, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Yet faith is such a powerful gift from God (Ephesians 2:8–9). Christ told His disciples that, with just a tiny measure of it, the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains. So, what does it mean to have “mustard seed faith”?

We see the reference to “mustard seed faith” twice in Scripture. In Matthew 17:14–20, we see Christ’s disciples unable to exorcise a demon from a young boy, even though Jesus had previously given them the authority to do this very thing (Matthew 10:1). When they inquired of Jesus why they were not able to drive the demon out, the Master replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there’ and it will move; Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:14–20).

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.”

“O unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” He replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

In this passage, the emphasis is not on healing but on the ability to “move this mountain” –the mountain being something that is overwhelming, daunting, seemingly impossible. The mountain represents those things that only God can overcome. The mustard seed –although tiny– is real and tangible. The point of the comparison is that faith must be more than a concept in your mind. It must produce results in your life – something real that you attribute to God’s compassion for you.

No doubt you have heard the old example about having faith in a chair or a church pew. Saying you trust the chair to support you is nothing more than words until that faith is exercised. It’s when you actually sit and rest in it that faith is realized. That is how faith is proved. It’s only after experiencing the sitting –and the resting– that you can know that the chair/pew is trustworthy.

As you journey through life, you can see faith do the same things that seeds do. They grow into something much bigger than what they started. Your faith –trust in God– will also grow and you will be amazed by what He does with you. Does that mean that if you trust God to change something (take away the bad and bring on the good circumstances), that it will happen? Not always, **moving the mountain is about taking away the fearful thoughts so that the circumstances are no longer something to dread. Circumstances will no longer control your life because you will trust God to do what is good for you –and for those around you.**

Next, in Luke 17:6, Jesus tells His disciples, *"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."* By using the uncommonly small mustard seed as an example, Jesus is speaking figuratively about the incalculable power of God when unleashed in the lives of those with true faith.

We are not to go about moving mountains and uprooting trees literally. The power of faith reflects the omnipotent nature of the God who bestows faith on His own. The mustard seed is one of the tiniest seeds found in the Middle East, to help us see that the amount of faith needed to do great things is very small indeed. Just as in the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32), Jesus uses rhetorical hyperbole to make the point that little is much when it comes from God. **The mustard seed in the parable grows to be a huge tree, representing the tiny beginnings of Christianity when just a few disciples began to preach and teach the gospel.** Eventually, the kingdom grew to huge proportions, encompassing the entire world and spreading over centuries.

So, too, does the tiniest bit of faith, when it is true faith in God, grow to immense proportions in the lives of believers and spreading out to influence all they come into contact with. One has only to read histories of the great men of the faith, such as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, to know that superhuman feats were performed by those whose faith was, at one time, only the size of a mustard seed.

Matthew 8:5-13 -- Astonished by Great Faith

Our lesson for today tells the story of a Roman centurion who came to Jesus on behalf of a servant who was paralyzed and suffering terribly at home. At this time many Jews thought visiting a Gentile home would defile them. Peter expressed this sentiment in Acts 10:25. Apparently it was one of those traditions people adopted as truth straight from God. It was not part of the law from God, but through the traditions and customs of the Rabbis over the years it had now been made to a law.

Jesus heard this centurion's plea and immediately replied that he would go and heal the sick servant. **Verse 8:** *The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

"The Roman centurion recognized in Jesus an authority far beyond what most observers detected. He trusted in the power and word of Jesus. ..." And how did Jesus' reply to this centurion's recognition of his authority and his faith in Jesus' ability to heal from afar?

He acknowledged his faith to those around him astonished that this great faith didn't come from one of the many Jews who had followed him and seen his miracles and heard his teachings daily. No, it came from a Gentile - a Roman soldier! **God delights to do extraordinary things for those who bank their lives on His goodness and grace. When we exercise faith in God, we're telling Him, 'I believe You.'**" The point is our faith pleases God! In fact, Hebrews 11:6 tells us, *without faith it is impossible to please God.*

Verse 13 "Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

Many non-believers have criticized Jesus by saying that the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, but the fact is Jesus never said the mustard seed was the smallest, but was one of the smallest. **The fact is that it is almost the smallest seed there is for a tree and it is so amazing that the tiny mustard seed produces a tree, not a tiny plant.** A mustard seed is only 1 to 2 millimeters which is about 1/64th of an inch! I believe that Jesus' point is that it only takes a tiny amount of faith to "move mountains".

The Mustard Seed

Even though it has one of the smallest seeds, mustard trees can grow up to 20 feet tall and 20 feet wide. The tree can grow in arid, dry climates and thrive even in clay or sandy soil. It can grow in hot, dry weather or cool, wet climates. **I see the mustard seed as being symbolic of faith in that our faith can be tested in the “dry times”, the most difficult of circumstances (drought, poor soil, and in clay or sandy ground). Also, even if the tree is cut down to the trunk, it can grow back again, so the analogy is that even during times of pruning, the believer can overcome and come back stronger than ever,** just like the mustard tree that’s been severely pruned, even if only a tiny bit of faith remains. The mustard tree is drought tolerant and if we have faith even the size of a tiny mustard seed, we too can tolerate the dry times in our lives, the difficult growing seasons of a Christian, and even when we are “planted” in poor soil we can still grow, even if we only have a small amount of faith focused on Jesus.

Conclusion

Do you have problems with your faith? You’re not alone. Even the disciples who spent three years with Jesus had difficulty in believing. Many times Jesus told them:

“You of little faith, why are you so afraid” (Matt 8:26)? “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:30)

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31)

“Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread?” (Matthew 16:8)

Jesus rebuked the disciples so often about their having “little faith” because they doubted His divinity. I too have been guilty of having little faith and I am not proud to admit that. Is He not God and being God, is He not all powerful? Yes, but **my humanity is too often pushing this knowledge out because I tend to only believe what I see. I must believe with the eyes of faith. My eyes that may not see Him must succumb to my head knowledge and heart knowledge that He is there nonetheless.** In fact, when I show a lack of faith I miss out on a blessing. Even though I have never seen Jesus, I know that He exists and He is there for us. We will see Him someday.

Jesus said to doubting Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). I admit it is hard to believe when we can’t see something but I must believe in Him...even though my eyes don’t see Him. That is what faith is all about. It only takes a tiny amount of faith to “move mountains.”

My faith is only as strong as the Object of my faith. The Object is Jesus Christ Who is God:

- **Omnipotent (all powerful),**
- **Omnipresent (present everywhere), and**
- **Omniscient (all knowing).**

That’s why only a tiny bit of faith can go a long, long way. Even if it’s 1/64th of an inch.

Imagine that you’re out jogging one day with Mike, a world record holder in the long jump at twenty-nine feet, four inches. While you’re running along, you hear a low rumble, and your feet sense a steadily increasing tremor that alerts you to the start of an earthquake like no other you’ve experienced.

Suddenly, a mere stride ahead of you and Mike, the earth splits open. You both come to a full stop to discover that you are isolated on a small sliver of earth, separated from safety by a

deep crevasse that is about thirty feet across. The little patch of earth you're standing on is crumbling in the continuing upheaval, and you see that it's a matter of moments before you both are cast into the crevasse where you'll be crushed by the lurching earth. Things look hopeless.

Your only hope is to jump across the canyon. Mike judges that the jump is about eight inches longer than his record-setting long jump, but he decides to try it anyway. He gets back as far as he can so that he can gather as much speed as possible. He crouches into a three-point stance, and you yell, "On your mark! Get set! GO!"

Mike runs as fast as he can. Right on the edge of the crevasse, he kicks off and launches himself into the air. It's a perfect jump. Sailing over the gully, he lands with the toes of both feet barely on the edge of the other side. His jump is an amazing twenty-nine feet, six inches—two inches farther than his world record! Unfortunately, the jump isn't far enough. His feet slip off the edge, and for a moment he scrambles to grab the edge with his hands. It's no good, though. As you watch he falls into the crevasse and dies. Poor Mike.

Now it's your turn. You crouch into a three-point stance as far from the take-off edge as possible. Mentally giving yourself the signal, you spring forward. Huffing and puffing, you pound up to the edge, kick off, and jump—straight down into the crevasse. You're dead too.

It didn't matter that Mike nearly got to the other side with a perfect, world-record long jump. It simply wasn't far enough. Judged by its final outcome, Mike's jump was no better than yours. Both of you died.

Getting to the heaven side of eternal life works much the same way. It doesn't matter how good you live, how many church services you attend, or how much better you are than other people. You can't save yourself. The best people in the world can't save themselves, "for all have sinned and fall short" (Romans 3:23). No one is good enough on his or her own.

That's why Jesus came. He's the only one who ever lived a perfect life. When we put our faith and trust in him and make him Lord of our lives, his perfection becomes ours. He's the only one who can get us safely to the other side. We must exercise faith to trust Him. Have you got that faith to put your hands and your life in His?