

## “Faith, No More, No Less”

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October 3, CBS MIAMI, “Steve Chrisomalis has been serving up piping hot burgers and fresh cut fries for close to a decade. The owner of Steve’s Burgers in New Jersey says business is booming. “It’s been the best year so far [for my business],” said Steve. . . A new report from the Centers for Disease Control shows about a third of American adults eat fast food on any given day.” I don’t think I eat fast food that often and I know I don’t spend on fast food what the report references: 40% of the money families spend on food is on eating out.<sup>1</sup>

What I find distressing is the last question I get before my order goes into the fast food mill—Do you want small, medium, or large? Or, would you like to upsize that? The tricky one is where they go ahead and place your order for a medium sized drink and fries, at additional cost of course, when I really wanted the small order to start with. “I want the small order.” “Are you sure?” the voice says. “I’m sure.” And, now I say, “and don’t forget my 10% senior discount.” The sermon today is going to shed light on faith where Jesus teaches his disciples that there is no upsizing faith to be had. There’s no small, medium, or large. Just faith, simple trusting in God faith. A habitual measure of faith that can cast mountains into seas, or even uproot and re-root trees by its potentiality.

I know we are often unsure about how much faith we have. Sometimes we even think that our prayers go unanswered because we do not have “enough” faith. Some people even think that if they can increase their faith enough somehow the possibility of super power or super wealth is possible. But, as Jesus demonstrates, even though there are spectacular kingdom stories, Jesus does not deal in the spectacular. No magical potions. No tricks. He purely seeks people of faith—not those with more, or those with less faith, just faith. Faith cannot be quantified. In Jesus’s own words only “habitually present” faith makes all the difference. So, what do the scriptures say about this?

There are variations on the mustard seed theme in Matthew and Mark but no mustard seed story is to be found in John. There are no Old Testament stories about mustard seeds. Mustard seeds are only found in six places in the Bible, all in the gospels.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://miami.cbslocal.com/2018/10/03/americans-fast-food-daily-basis/> (accessed October 6, 2018).

Our text today is an interesting lesson presented by Luke about one of Jesus's lessons Jesus. You might say it is unique. Unique among the mustard seed references in the New Testament. Whereas Matthew says that Jesus's illustration contains the idea that if the disciples had the faith of a mustard seed then they could move a mountain into the sea. Mark's mustard seed reference includes the mountain illustration but doesn't tie it to a proportional faith, but just that Jesus told his disciples to have faith.<sup>2</sup>

Luke does not talk about the disciples' poverty of faith about someone failing to perform a miracle as Matthew framed the story. Rather, for Luke, Jesus instructed them about what to do if someone "sinned" among them. "To sin", in this case, seems to refer to some action where an error of judgement within their group or an acquaintance offended the disciples: "if he sins," and "if he sins against you." The disciples weren't pleased with the instructions. Here was what they were supposed to do. If anyone sins among you rebuke them but forgive them if they repent, even if it means doing it seven times a day. The instruction is reminiscent of another of Jesus's teaching we know about forgiving someone seven times seventy times. Their response was something like "Okay, how are we supposed to do that? Maybe if you would increase our faith that might be possible."

Jesus responds with how much faith one needs to turn impossibilities into possibilities. It would require the faith of a single mustard seed. You don't need me to tell you how small a mustard seed it. However, I can add a couple of contextual clues. The seed itself explodes from a pod of seeds from a plant that at maturity is about nine feet tall. Most people in the middle east think of the plant as invasive for that reason. To uproot it is not a way to control it. To replant it is to ensure dissemination. There are thousands of seeds lying hidden in the soil just waiting to pop up whether you pull up the mother plant or not. To produce such a phenomenon, you only need one seed, only one. Jesus wasn't talk about size at all, but about the potentiality one small mustard plant has in just one of its seeds.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew and much in Mark is about the overbearing weight of the temple/temple mountain on the lives of the Galilean/Palestinian Jews. So, most commentators suggest that their version focuses on how simple faith in Jesus's teaching would be enough to "move a mountain." Which mountain? Perhaps he was referring to the temple mount. On the other hand, the biblical language of Mathew says that the reason the disciples could not heal a demon-possessed boy was because of their *oligopistia*, a Greek word not found outside the Bible. It is from two words which combined mean poverty of faith. In John 10:3, 4, 27 it is used three times to correct the disciples for not listening to his voice. Given the context for Matthew's account and Luke's account, I believe the speculation about the temple mount is doubtful at best.

The tone of the original language is one of correction. It's like when your parents would say "if you had studied more for your classes instead of goofing off you might have made a better grade on it. I'm sorry, but you're grounded until your grades come up." So, we hear Jesus say, "if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed you could say to a mulberry tree . . ." Some versions translate the verb *had faith as a past tense*, while others use the word *have as a present tense*. Interestingly, either translation would sound correct, except in this case, the word (exete imp. ind. 2<sup>nd</sup> person, pl.) translated "have" or "had" is in the "imperfect tense." That is tough to put into flowing English for reading but it literally means "if all of you habitually had faith then all of you . . ." "Thus, in this case, Jesus was saying to them that it is not about upsizing your faith from small to medium, or medium to large. It is about demonstrating faith in whatever situation you encounter. Not more, not less, but essential faith. That is supported throughout Luke's gospel.

"When a woman, a so-called "sinner," pours ointment and kisses Jesus' feet . . . Jesus not only forgives her sins but also says "your faith has saved you." (7:50) He says the same thing to them . . . a blind beggar who wants to see again (18:42); a Samaritan leper who comes back to thank him after he has been healed (17:19); and a woman who touches him in order to be healed of hemorrhages (8:48). Moreover, when a Roman centurion goes to great lengths to have him heal a trusted servant, Jesus exclaims, "Not even in Israel have I found such [not such a great, but faith like this] faith" (7:9). Conversely, the disciples often appear to lack faith. When they are in a boat with Jesus and a storm happens, they get so anxious that Jesus has to ask, "Where is your faith?" (8:25). Aware that Peter will betray him, Jesus prays that his faith will not fail him (22:32).<sup>3</sup>

I do feel compassion for faithful people who want to believe that if they can generate more faith somehow then they will be able to move God, maybe even control God, by how much faith they mustered—excuse the pun. Luke doesn't say that the disciples could muster more faith, only that habitually living by faith is the answer to the most amazing matters they might face on their journey. But, how is that possible? Why not more faith? Wouldn't that be better? It's really in the word that Jesus uses that the biblical writers translate faith. It is the word that really means to something like "to be persuaded." Faith has persuasion at its core. What are you persuaded that God can do? Not do for you, but just do? You either live by faith or you don't.

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<sup>3</sup>Lois Malcolm, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1785](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1785) (accessed October 6, 2018).

Our faith is not something we can generate from within ourselves. It depends on God. By grace, the scriptures tell us, we are saved by grace through the medium of faith, not from ourselves, lest anyone should ever boast about it. To set up a class system among Christians based on measures of individual faith would be inconsistent with the scripture and our belief about how we relate to God and God's kingdom through Jesus Christ.

I don't always eat mustard, but when I do I admire the 1000 mustard seeds that made the eight-ounce dispenser. I ponder the great question about when Jesus comes again whether I will be found with the seed of faith within me.