

Why do we have faith? What is the goal of faith? I'm not asking the question, what is faith, because that's something altogether different. Rather, I'm asking what do we hope to gain through faith? And maybe that seems like a strange question to us, because we usually don't think of faith as something that we have in order to get something. But the question is still important. What do we hope to gain through faith? What is the goal? Because faith has a goal. Faith looks toward something, and we need to know what it is that we're looking towards. Because Jesus shows us in our Gospel reading for today that faith is a very great thing, something that can even move mountains. But he also shows us that we can want it for the wrong reasons, that we can have the wrong goal in mind. So what is the goal of faith?

In the first part of our reading, Jesus tells us a very difficult and hard truth. He says in verses 3 and 4: "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." And forgiveness all by itself is hard enough for us, because we don't want to forgive by nature. It's hard to forgive somebody who's wronged us. We want to say, only if they come to me first, only if they come crawling on the ground, begging for my forgiveness, will I even consider the possibility of forgiving them. But not a moment before, because I'm not going to go to them. But Jesus commands us to forgive those who repent, without qualification, without hesitation. If he repents, Jesus says, forgive him, because that is the Christian thing to do. In fact, Jesus tells us in other places in the Gospels if we do not forgive, then we're not Christians at all. Matthew chapter 6, Jesus says, "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Forgiveness is part of what it means to be a Christian.

And all of that is hard enough, but Jesus takes it one step further. He says every time your brother repents, forgive him. If he repents once, forgive him. If he repents seven times, forgive him seven times. If he repents a hundred times, forgive him a hundred times. Be willing to forgive your brother in Christ over and over and over again, no matter how many times it is. But that's really hard for us to do as well, because we want to think that once is bad enough. But if I have to forgive him again for the same thing, that's going too far. He's beyond forgiveness. He's simply sinned too many times against me for me to forgive him. But Jesus tells us to keep forgiving, to keep showing that forgiveness just as God keeps forgiving us. Because where would we be, Christians, if God forgave us only once? Why then do we treat our brother in this way? Being ready and willing to forgive is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

But hearing all of that, it's only natural for us to look at ourselves, to look at our own hearts and realize how we have not measured up to that. If we are honest with ourselves, we don't have to look very far before we see our own shortcomings. And if we have faith, it's only natural for us to want to do better, to become more like Jesus, to turn away from our lovelessness and to forgive more and more. We want more faith. And so it's only natural for the apostles to say to Jesus in our reading: "Increase our faith! We know that we have failed. We know that we have not measured up. We want to be better than what we are. We want to be more like you, Lord! Change us to be more like you. Increase our faith in all things."

Because faith is something that can increase, Christians. There is such a thing as a small faith. There is such a thing as a great faith. Jesus talks about a small faith, for example, in Matthew chapter 14, when he looks at Peter as he pulls him up out of the water and says to him: "O you of

little faith, why did you doubt?" A little faith is one that is full of doubts, full of uncertainties, something that needs to grow. And there is such a thing as a great faith too, one that will not be denied. Jesus, for example, in Matthew 15 speaks to the Syrophenician woman and says to her: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." Faith can grow. Faith can increase. And it is right to ask for more faith. But faith is something that can only come from God, and that's why the disciples asked Jesus for more faith.

But we need to ask ourselves at this point: why are we asking for more faith? What do we hope to get from it? What is the goal? Because Jesus shows us in our reading that the apostles are actually asking for the wrong reasons. They want more faith because they think that greater faith means that they will be great, that they will become something important. How often do we hear them bickering with each other in the Gospels? Luke chapter 22 says: "A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest." So it is easy for us to imagine that if we had more faith that we would become something great in the process. In other words, we want more faith in order to satisfy our vanity. But Jesus rebukes them, and he shows them what true faith is in our reading for today.

Because on the one hand, Christians, faith is something great. Make no mistake about that. Even a tiny amount of faith can do great things. If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, Jesus says, if you had a tiny faith, the smallest amount imaginable, you could say to this tree, "Be uprooted and be planted in the sea," and it would obey you. Jesus is not commanding us to do silly things like moving trees around in this passage. Rather, what he means is that faith can do what seems impossible. Even a small faith can move mountains. A small faith can command that deeply rooted tree to move at a word. We might say a small faith can make pigs fly, to do those things which seem impossible to the world, because nothing is too hard for God. This is why Hebrews chapter 11 says: "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight." They did all of these things not because they were perfect. You don't even have to read the Old Testament very closely to know that they weren't. But rather they did these things because they trusted in the Lord. They had faith in him who could do all things. And therefore even this tiny faith in the Lord can move mountains, because it holds on to him who can do all things. That is true faith.

But on the other hand, faith is also something humble. It is not proud or boasting. Because I think it's very easy to hear everything that was just said about faith and to want that for ourselves for all the wrong reasons. To think that if we had just a little bit of faith or a little bit more faith, we could be something great too. Imagine what I could do if I could command trees to move! Imagine what I could do if I could move mountains by my faith! Imagine the good that I could do in this world if I had the faith that Jesus is talking about. But that's not faith. That's greed disguised as faith. Or we might think that having more faith would make God owe us something, as if I have done something above and beyond, something extraordinary. See, Lord? I have forgiven my brother seven times. I've forgiven him a hundred times. I've forgiven him a thousand times, just like you said. How great I am for having done that! How great it is and how better I am because of it! I'm so glad I'm not like all of those other people who haven't done it. That's not faith either. That's pride disguised as faith. Greater faith should not lead us into greater sin.

And to show this, then, Jesus tells them a parable. He says a servant went out to plow the field or to keep the sheep. In other words, he went out to do exactly what he was supposed to do. He was doing his job that his master had given him. Do you think that when that servant comes back that he should demand some kind of special reward for having done it? That his master should serve him and do all of these extra things for him, just because he has been out in the field or taking care of the sheep? Not at all. Rather, the master will tell him to do another part of his job and to serve him at table, and afterwards he may then eat. He has only done what was expected of him.

And likewise, true faith is humble, Christians. True faith does what it has been commanded to do. It does not imagine that it is going above and beyond when it does this. It does not think that it has done something worthy of praise. It does not think that God owes us something for what we have done. If I have forgiven my brother once, if I have forgiven him seven times, if I have forgiven him a hundred times, I have only done my duty. Because this is what it means to be a Christian.

So what, then, is the goal of faith? To become like God. True faith recognizes its own failures. It recognizes how it has not measured up. But instead of puffing itself up, thinking that it has done something great, it asks the Lord to be ever more shaped like him. It's never content with good enough. It never wants to just be noticed. True faith turns towards Jesus. It turns towards him and wants to be like him in everything: to think like him, to act like him, to speak like him, to be him, to imitate him in every way. Why? Because true faith recognizes what Jesus has done for us. Jesus forgave us when we had gone astray like sheep. Jesus saved us while we were still his enemies. Jesus loved us when we did not love him. And for that reason, true faith sees what he has done and in gratitude wants to be like him in every way. And it is content to serve him in all things.

So Christians, when we pray, "Increase our faith!"--and we should pray that--when we pray, "Increase our faith!", let us not mean, "Increase our faith, O Lord, so that we may be something great!" But rather let us mean, "Increase our faith so that we may be more like you in all things." And God will answer that prayer and shape us to be like Jesus in everything.

Let us pray. Almighty Father, increase our faith so that we may be ever more conformed to the image of your Son. Lead us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Cause us to love as you have first loved us. Do not let us be conformed to this world, but to be transformed through the renewal of our minds, because you have caused us to bear the image of the man of heaven, Jesus Christ, our Lord; in whose name we pray. Amen.