

“A FATHER WHO STRETCHED HIS FAITH”

I can certainly relate to the father, who came to Jesus and said: “Lord. I believe. Help my unbelief” (vs. 24). Can’t you?

That remark has always intrigued me. “Lord, I do believe. But I’m having trouble with my unbelief.”

What is he saying? Is it some religious double-talk?

Many Christian people talk about faith, out of one side of their mouths, and then talk doubts and fears, out of the other side. “I believe, and yet I don’t believe.”

I once heard a pastor, who preached for 20 minutes about: “If we have faith as small as a mustard seed, we could move a mountain.” Then, after the sermon, he proceeded to beg the people to dig into their pockets a little deeper, since the church hadn’t paid its light bill for the past two months. He talked about faith enough to move mountains, but he didn’t have faith enough to believe that God could pay the light bill. It was double-talk.

Now, of course, there are different kinds of faith. There is a “saving faith.” That is the simple, childlike faith, which we have when we ask Jesus to come into our lives and to make us God’s children, forever after.

And don’t knock it. The Bible declares that we are “saved by (such a) faith.” But there is also a “working faith”...a faith that causes things to happen. It is the faith, as a grain of a mustard seed, which can see mountainous obstacles moved out of the path of progress.

And, when it comes to this kind of faith, we all sense the need for more. We all believe, but we need to believe a lot more!

Obviously, that is what this father was talking about, when he said. “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” “I do believe, but I need my faith stretched. I need even more faith, if I’m going to see your power in the way in which my poor demented son needs it.” Lord, I do believe. But help my unbelief! Lord, stretch my faith.

This seems to be the desire of every sincere Christian today. I hear it all the time: “I don’t have enough faith.” “I need more faith.” “I wish I had as much faith as someone else does.”

We all know that God responds to our faith. Vs. 23 tells us that “All things are possible to him that believes.”

What “separates the men from the boys,” in God’s work, is not talent, brains, nor energy. It is who has the most “gutsy” faith.

A person, who steps out on the faith, will be used more by God. A church, which operates on daring faith, will achieve more. So, having more faith should be the earnest desire of every growing Christian.

Like Jesus first disciples, if our faith does not keep growing, we will sooner or later come up against situations, which we cannot handle (vs. 18-19, 28-29).

So we all need to pray that our faith will be stretched. “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!”

What really sparks this off is when we see someone else, who seems to have a lot more faith. I have a friend, who literally produces \$100,000 worth of television spots, twice a year. He has “no visible means of support” other than his Social Security check. Yet he never even asks for money on his TV shows. And he always uses the best equipment, to represent our God in a first-class manner.

But money just comes in the mail. And he always has enough to pay his \$100,000 light and camera bills, by the time the filming is over.

When I see his faith in action, I want to pray: “Lord, I do believe, but I need my faith stretched more. Help my unbelief.”

I’ve been reading about a man, named Frank Buchman, who would be invited to lead a religious crusade in some place, like India. He would plan to take 200 personal workers with him.

Yet he never knew, ahead of time, where the money would come from. But it was always there, when he needed it.

I haven’t made up my mind whether people like that inspire me or intimidate me! But when I see what can be done, if people have enough faith to get into action for God, I want to say: “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” Stretch my faith!

Now we have all seen examples of such strong faith. The real question is: just how does a person stretch his or her faith?

From this story of “A Father Who Stretched His Faith,” I believe that we can learn how to grow a faith, which is big enough to meet the challenges of our lives. I believe that we can do it, if we put these lessons into practice.

But before we go any further, let me urge you to be sure that you have that initial “saving faith.” Before you try to find that “faith which makes things happen,” or that “overcoming-the-cries-of-life faith,” let’s get first things first.

You can't begin in the middle of the Christian life. "You must be born again" (John 3:3), before you can grow in faith. You must have a time of change (or conversion), before you can go very far in God's new direction.

Our first step is to see our need for forgiveness and to turn to Jesus, as our personal Savior. We must first believe that He will give us a new life as a part of His family, just like He promised. That is "saving faith."

Now, if you are confident in that saving relationship with Jesus, then you are ready to say: "Lord, I believe" (that you have saved me). Now "help my unbelief." Increase my faith, so I can effectively do the work, which you have assigned to me.

This story points out two things, which can help to stretch our faith. Notice:

I. THE THINGS WHICH HINDER OUR FAITH

What kept this man, who did believe, from believing enough to see his son made whole? What keeps us, who are trusting Jesus for the "sweet bye and bye," from trusting Him for the "nasty now and now?"

One hindrance to a greater faith is EXPERIENCE – vs. 21.

Jesus asked the father how long his son had been this way. "From a child," he answered.

For year after year, it had been the father's experience to see his son convulse, and gnash his teeth, and mope around (pine away) – vs. 18. He had already everything, which he knew to do. But, up until now, nothing had helped. Naturally, after these discouraging experiences, it was hard for him to believe that Jesus could help.

How many of us are hindered by our past experiences? We've tried before, without success, and there's not much hope for us to try again.

How many churches never expect (nor accomplish) anything great from God, simply because they have had too many disappointing experiences in the past.

If they tried for years to make a witness in the neighborhood and have been unable to make a dent, no wonder they no longer get excited about a revival effort, or some new form of outreach. If they never met their budget goals, no wonder they get penny-pinching and critical of any new venture of faith. If they've had a few fights and splits through the years, no wonder they run scared, every time something controversial is suggested. And yet some new group down the street, who never knew any better, will try the same thing, believe God, and see miracles happen.

Experiences can hinder a growing faith. All experience is not the best teacher.

I don't even care very much, any more, whether a person has had any "experience." What I care about more is what kind of experiences they have had: good ones or bad ones.

Please, if you've had bad experiences elsewhere, just keep them to yourself, and don't infect us with unbelief. I've met so many bitter men with bitter memories of bitter experiences. I can't afford to hang around such people. It drags me down.

It's so easy to surrender the leadership of the church to the negative forces. Anybody can be afraid and "agin" everything. It takes a person of faith to move ahead.

Be careful not to let your faith be hindered by experience and to settle into the deadening routine of a faithless existence.

Another hindrance to a growing faith can be our **FRIENDS** – vs. 25.

Just when this father expected to exercise his faith, all of his friends gathered around ("came running together") to see what would happen.

Wouldn't it be so much easier to trust God, if everybody else were not watching over our shoulders? Well-meaning and morbidly curious friends never make it easier for us to grow a bigger faith.

If people just minded their own business and kept quiet, it would help. But someone is always saying: "I wouldn't try it, if it were me." Or, "I don't believe in guys like this Jesus." Or "I saw someone else, who tried to step out on faith, and they surely got hurt."

Tell me: why don't other people encourage our faith? Maybe "misery loves company!"

Even Jesus' best friend, Peter, tried to talk Him out of God's plan. Jesus finally had to say to him: "Get behind me, Satan."

I don't know whether I'd try that on my friends.

But it is a fact that some other Christians don't always help. Jesus' disciples had actually discouraged this man – vs. 18.

Please, be careful with whom you associate in church! Love everyone. But pick people who give you a lift, with whom to hang around and with whom to counsel about your deepest thoughts. If you pick some defeated or negative Christian, they may drain away what little faith you have!

Another hindrance to a growing faith can be our **FEELINGS**.

It amazes me how we can become so tied to our emotional “feelings.” Now this man probably “felt” pretty low. He felt tired and discouraged, from years of problems with his son. He must have felt awful, when the disciples could not help him

Yet, he asked Jesus to “help my unbelief.” Bless his heart. He never mentions his feelings.

We would all do well not to listen to our feelings. Instead we should listen to God’s Word and that still, small voice of God’s Spirit, Who leads us.

My feelings are very susceptible to discouragement. At times Satan can use them to slow me down. But, I’m learning to look beyond them and to bring them under the control of the Holy Spirit.

A fourth hindrance to a growing faith is **GUILT**.

Doubtless this father had often wondered “why” his son was not right. Had it been some sin of his own, for which he was being punished? Maybe he didn’t deserve Jesus’ help.

Please don’t let guilt knock you out of gear. If you have done wrong and know that you have, then confess it and accept God’s gracious promise of forgiveness. If you don’t know of anything, which you have done wrong, then don’t borrow trouble. And certainly don’t let anyone else, or Satan, put some kind of a false guilt trip on you.

But don’t even allow the thought to enter your mind that God wants to punish you. Oh, I know: Our “sins will find us out. What we sow, we must reap.” But God takes no delight in this. He wants to forgive us and to help us to get back on track. He wants us to become “overcomers”...even over our past mistakes and the effects of our rebellious choices.

If you have been saved from your sins, then God wants to do great things with you. That’s why He called you. And don’t let guilt, from the past, stifle your faith to believe that God can do great things with you, in the future!

Quickly, let me suggest:

II. THE THINGS WHICH STRETCH OUR FAITH.

If we want to stretch our faith, we must.....

CHOOSE the Life of Faith. Make a decision: I want to stretch my faith. I am determined to grow a bigger faith. I shall not be satisfied to wade around in the shallow waters of mediocrity, for the rest of my life.

Listen, these people, whom we admire and of whom we “wish we had their kind of faith,” weren’t just born with it. It has little to do with their basic temperaments.

They are as human as we are. They enjoy security and dread risk.

But they saw, at some point in their lives, that God expected them to operate on faith. And they made a deliberate choice to do so. And most likely, they have had to renew that choice on numerous occasions.

One of these days, we must each make a choice to walk by faith or to continue to walk by sight. If we wait until we feel more courageous, or to see that everything looks safe and secure, we will never stretch our faith.

We will have to choose the life of faith. Won't you choose to step out into it, today?

It's like learning to swim. You have to choose to jump in and trust your weight to the water. Only then can the water buoy you up.

Just so, we must decide to jump into God's plan. And only then will we discover that the Lord is able to hold us up.

Every hero in the Bible, who acted on faith, had to choose to do so. Peter had fished all night. He knew all the best spots, yet he had caught nothing.

On the next morning Jesus told him to launch out and get ready for a catch. His friends rolled their eyes and raised their eyebrows. But Peter said: "I don't see it. Nevertheless, at your Word, I will."

If you and I want a bigger faith, then we must choose. "I will trust God. I will stand on His Word. I will step out into the deeper waters of faith." I will!

Then.....

FOCUS Your attention on Jesus.

This father could have looked at the crowd and been afraid. He could have looked at the disciples and been discouraged by their failure. He could have looked at this demented son and felt helpless. But he looked at Jesus and focused his whole attention on Him. "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

The life of faith means taking our eyes off of every other resource and concentrating on Jesus alone.

Paul says, in Hebrews 12:1-2: don't look back at the past. Don't look at the crowd in the grandstands. Don't look at the other runners. But, "looking unto Jesus...run the race that is set before us."

Peter was challenged by Jesus, to walk across the water. As long as he kept his focus on Jesus, Peter did fine. It's only when he looked at the waves—it's only when he focused on the problem, instead of the problem-solver—that he began to sink.

So will you and I. So let's focus our attention on Jesus.

Then.....

STAND On God's Promises.

Jesus promised: "If you believe, all things are possible to him who believes." And the father took Jesus at His Word. He said, "I do believe."

We too need to stand on Jesus' promises. If He has promised something, then we can reverently, but specifically, hold Him to His promise.

Now this is where some get into trouble. Remember, faith is not wishful thinking. We have no right to hope that Jesus will do things, which He never even hinted that we could expect.

For instance, He never promised that all things, which happen to us, would be good. You are a "Pollyanna," if you expect everything that comes your way to be good.

But God did promise (Romans 8:28) that "all things will work together for our ultimate good, IF we answer His call to salvation and follow after His purpose for our lives. And how many of us can say "amen" to that!

Remember also that faith is not presumption. Many presume upon God. They expect Him to do things, which He never promised. They presume that He will give them all of their extravagant wants, when He only promised to meet their "needs" (Philippians 4:13).

He teaches us to pray for "daily bread," not cake...and not necessarily enough, stashed away in the bank, that you will never have to depend on Him for any more.

But listen, if Jesus promised it, we can expect it. Put His promises to the test. Try out: Malachi 3:10; Matthew 6:33; Philippians 4:13; Proverbs 3:5-6. In God's Word, there are 2,000 promises for this present earthly life.

Grasp them by faith. Refuse to let go of them. Reverently claim them. Pray for guidance, to correctly apply what they mean to your present situation.

And you will find that your faith is beginning to stretch and grow.

Then.....

LAY ASIDE Any Sins and Weights, which might hold you back from going farther in your faith.

Hebrews 12:1 – “...let us lay aside every weight and the sin which does so easily beset us, and run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...”

Please don't miss this. If there is some rebellious spirit or wrong desire, which we will not surrender, it will weigh us down like a heavy weight, and it will keep us from making progress in our journey of faith. I cannot emphasize this enough.

Now I don't want us to be morbid, but I do want us to keep short accounts on our sins and to confess them and lay them aside, as quickly as possible. They are dead weight. They grieve God's Spirit, who wants to strengthen us, and they hold us back from winning new battles.

If you are having trouble in finding the faith you need to win in one of life's battles, then please search your life. Is there anything in your life that is not right?

In His “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5), Jesus gives us four absolute standards, by which to evaluate our lives. Does what we are doing pass the test of being...

Absolutely honest? (Matthew 5:33-37)

Absolutely pure? (Matthew 5:27-30)

Absolutely unselfish? (Matthew 5:38-42)

Absolutely loving? (Matthew 5:43-48)

Now I understand that, in our present day world of “anything goes,” this all sounds very idealistic and impractical. But then we seem to be living in a world, where there is a power shortage. People don't seem to have the power to overcome life's obstacles, and they certainly don't have that power-with-God, which we have seen at other times.

Maybe we need to stop “pooh-poohing” and listen to our Creator. God says that hanging onto sins and selfishness can hinder our faith and hold us back from successfully “running the race,” with which God has challenged us.

So, **if you want to grow, let go!** Let go of anything, which God calls a sin or “excess baggage.”

Confess it. Turn from it. Ask God for strength to change!

One man, who is certainly powerful-with-God, is Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade For Christ. For decades, he has been a man whose faith has moved mountains and brought multitudes to the Savior. If he never did anything more than to write “The Four Spiritual Laws,” he would have revolutionized evangelism in our age.

But Bill was not always so. For a while, his faith could not seem to get off the ground.

Do you see? He was carrying some baggage. It was not an out-and-out sin, but it was a weight.

Bill was determined to become a millionaire. And three times, he did. With his specialty candy business, he made his millions.

But God was trying to use him for something greater. So God had to get his attention, by letting Bill Bright's business fail. And he lost everything.

Three times, this same scenario happened. Bill was, by his own admission, a stubborn disciple.

But finally he learned that his business and his desire for wealth were keeping him from God's best. So he laid it aside.

And his faith began to grow, until his vision has affected millions across this world!

Are you ready to lay aside every weight and sin and to begin to run the race of faith, which God has set before you. Are you ready to pray: "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

Then you are ready for your faith to be stretched. And how great it is going to be!!!