

“Lord, Increase Our Faith!”

BY JIM PERKINS

While he was teaching a class on Romans chapter 12 recently, Rich asked us to share which principle found in verses 3-8 we would appropriate for ourselves and memorialize on a refrigerator magnet as a reminder to ourselves every day.

I immediately thought of the “faith” principle found in verses 3 and 7:
“... each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”
“... in proportion to our faith...”

I found the Indiana Jones movies to be very entertaining 30 years ago, with all the swashbuckling action scenes and narrow escapes. However, my favorite scene may be the one where Indiana Jones has to take a “leap of faith” to cross a wide and deep chasm with no bridge, to save his dying father. (You can see this scene if you search YouTube for “Indiana Jones leap of faith.” The 1:20 — just over a minute — video is adequate to absorb the feeling of the moment).

It’s amazing: Indiana Jones has to compose himself, gather his breath, and take that first step off the cliff ledge from where he is standing, to certain death if he would plunge into that chasm. The moviemakers then show that he seems to be walking on thin air at first, then the audience visualizes the rock bridge across the chasm that he could not see from the angle of his perch. But, that first step of faith is breathtaking!

A biblical example of this confidence building faith is found in 2 Kings 6:8-17 where the quiet and assured prophet Elisha is explained by his “eye of faith.” Elisha and his servant had been surrounded by a Syrian army prepared to kill the two of them one day, and his servant was afraid. Elisha then prayed that the servant’s eyes would be opened, and the servant then saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

If I were to create a refrigerator magnet for myself, I would use the words of Luke 17:5 (containing this principle of Romans 12:3, 7):

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

The apostles said this, feeling overwhelmed by what Jesus had just commanded them, in response to what Jesus had instructed them in Luke 17:1-4, where He had first warned them, under threat of a worse fate than having a millstone hung around their neck and thrown into the sea, not to be responsible for causing one of His “little ones” to sin. So, he warns them: “Pay attention to yourselves!” then commands them to forgive others “seven” times. The message of Jesus is clear: Do not cause another to sin by withholding your forgiveness from him (and, in doing so, maintain a “chasm” between the two of you that may tempt him to sin — perhaps against you — or prevents you from being a positive force for righteousness in his life).

In Matthew 18:22, He commanded Peter to forgive someone who sins against him “seventy times seven,” a statement of hyperbole that encompasses a constant and enduring state of forgiveness of another who has sinned against him.

Returning to Luke 17:4, Jesus commanded His apostles to forgive someone who had sinned against them seven times in a day, and had said “I repent” seven times in a day. Don’t you think that by the fifth or sixth time that person has sinned against you in a single day, his words of repentance might seem hollow?

Many have concluded from this scripture that we are only required to forgive someone who has repented and apologized for their sin against us, but the hyperbole of the scripture here indicates that we are to forgive after multiple sins, even after the words of repentance have become meaningless to us; or, requiring still more faith: the words never come!

How important for the apostles to embed this principle into their hearts after their Lord ascended into heaven, and they went about their business of winning souls for Him... in many a foreign and lonely place, many a dark night, after their torturers had pounded and sliced open their flesh, spit upon them, emotionally abused them! Keeping a steady heart of forgiveness towards even their torturers would be necessary to complete their mission of offering the gospel of love to even the worst of sinners. What an impact it must have been upon their torturers the day following their worst behavior towards the apostle they had abused with so much hatred... to hear that apostle, even perhaps still bleeding and feeling the deep ache of their injuries, answer kindly to them!

What measure of faith this requires!

Paul went on, in Romans 12:8, to describe the exercise of this gift, “according to the faith that God has assigned”, and “in proportion to our faith”:

... the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness

To be clear, “mercy” requires that we treat them “better than they deserve.” Justice would allow us to respond to one who has sinned against us in a negative fashion similar to the way they have injured us. Mercy, as we shall observe shortly, requires a much more positive, proactive response.

And, Paul, you must be kidding! Dispense our mercy towards others who have wounded us with “cheerfulness?”

What measure of faith this requires!

However, lest we conclude that those who “show mercy” are only those who have that particular gift... we find the set of commands in Romans 12:14ff, applied to *all* Christians.

Some excerpts:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

The commands here, if obeyed in the spirit conveyed by the words, require that the Christian trust God to render judgment against those who have wounded us, like Jesus did:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 1 Peter 2:23

What measure of faith (trust) this requires!

The commands of Romans 12:14ff, demand that the Christian *proactively* "nurture" those who have wounded us, discerning and providing for their needs, whether those needs be physical (Matt. 5:42), spiritual (Matt. 5:44), or emotional (Matt. 5:47).

In short, He requires Christians to *trust* Him and His ways, rejecting all the world's perspectives that are so ingrained in us about "self care," instead substituting the ethic of "caring for others."

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

Satan rules over the kingdom of "self."

Jesus rules over the kingdom of "self-sacrifice to serve others."

Paul's final words in Romans 12:21, the ethic of Christ in a nutshell:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What measure of trust (faith) this requires!

If this were the commonly understood "ethic" of Christians, how different would be our congregations, our marriages, our families! How different from the world!

"Lord, increase *my* faith!"