

Matthew 17:14-20

Introduction

We have just had the mountaintop experience of the transfiguration of Jesus where He was “*changed*” before the disciples and revealed in power and in glory. “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light.” Here is the one in Daniel “like a son of man” who is presented before the Ancient of Days, and who receives all authority in heaven and on earth so that all peoples, nations, and languages might serve Him. Here is the one of whom God Himself says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Here is the one for whom *all things* must be possible, for there is nothing and no one that can ever resist His will.

And yet it is immediately after this heavenly vision of power and glory on the mountain top that we descend now to a very different kind of picture – a picture of human weakness, and failure, and unbelief. One of Raphael’s paintings is called “The Transfiguration”. I would have projected this painting on the screen today if it weren’t for the fact that I believe any *picture* of the transfiguration of Jesus is actually an insult to the true glory of that event. But Raphael was very insightful when underneath his portrayal of the transfiguration (in the very *same* painting) he included a portrayal of the disciples and their inability to heal the demon-possessed boy. Raphael was right to do this! Matthew, Mark, and Luke all intended that we should read this story of what happened at the *bottom* of the mountain *in the full light* of what has just transpired at the *top* of the mountain. And so we begin in verses 14-16:

I. Matthew 17:14–16 — And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.”

We know from verses 18-19 that this man’s son was demon possessed and that his fits and seizures were the result of this demon possession. We also know that when Jesus commissioned the disciples all the way back in Matthew chapter ten, he gave them *authority to cast out demons*.

✓ Matthew 10:1 (cf. 10:8) — And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction... These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them... “Proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.”

The casting out of demons was meant to go hand in hand with the preaching of the kingdom. The rule and reign of God has come now in the person of the Messiah and he will wage war on the devil and destroy both him and his works. But not only were the disciples given the authority to cast out demons, but can also be confident that they had been successfully exercising this authority for some period of time!

✓ Luke 10:17 — The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”

If the seventy-two had been successfully casting out demons, then we have to assume that this would have included the twelve disciples closest to Jesus! But now it would seem that something has gone horribly and terribly wrong. Here is a desperate father with a son who has been suffering greatly and who is in constant danger of his life from demon-possession, and this desperate father brought his son to Jesus' disciples, *and they could not heal him*. But how can this be? They have been commissioned and authorized to cast out demons by the Messiah Himself! What can this failure mean? What does it mean for the kingdom? What does it say about the rule and reign of God in the Messiah? This is no little, insignificant problem that we're dealing with here! "I brought my son to your disciples, and they *could not* heal him." Somehow, somewhere along the line, something has happened. Something has, indeed, gone terribly wrong, and it could easily appear to some that the kingdom itself is in jeopardy.

And yet let's not forget that even as the disciples were failing in their attempt to cast out the demon there at the bottom of the mountain, Jesus, at the top of the mountain, was revealed before Peter, James, and John in all of His divine power and glory with His face shining like the sun and his clothes white as light. Let's not forget that even as the kingdom appeared to be faltering there at the bottom of the mountain, Jesus, at the top of the mountain, was talking with the eschatological figures of Moses and Elijah, and the voice of the Shekinah glory was saying of Jesus: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." So what exactly is happening? What does it all *mean*?

II. Matthew 17:17a — And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"

These are *strong* words full of feeling and emotion – full of anger and frustration! But *in light of what we have just seen at the top of the mountain*, maybe we can understand the *intensity* of Jesus' emotion as He confronts this very dismal and depressing scene at the bottom of the mountain. Jesus echoes the words of Moses' song in Deuteronomy thirty-two:

✓ Deuteronomy 32:5, 20 — [The people of Israel] have dealt corruptly with [the Lord]; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; *they are a crooked and twisted generation*... And [the Lord] said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for *they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness*.

As one commentator points out, "Moses is speaking of the people as a whole, [but] Jesus' complaint... has been provoked by the failure of his own disciples, who in their lack of faith represent the failing of the people as a whole; if even they, from their position of special privilege, do not have the faith to draw on God's saving power, what hope is there for the whole generation?" (France; cf. Blomberg) And so the failure of the disciples reflects the "*perverse unbelief*" (cf. Carson) of the entire generation of their day. They are perverse and twisted because as another commentator says: "Their minds and hearts are turned in the wrong direction, away from undivided trust in God" (Hendriksen). So the meaning of perverse here is not sexual depravity, but rather a spiritual "twistedness" where those who have the greatest spiritual privilege and the greatest "biblical" knowledge are actually the ones most lacking in faith and in trust! *This* is a perverse situation! This is a twisted reality!

“O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” And once again Jesus seems to be echoing another Old Testament passage, this time from the book of Numbers, where it is God Himself who exclaims:

✓ Numbers 14:27 (NET; cf. 11:10-15) — How long must I bear with this evil congregation?

Jesus is angry, and even exasperated with the persistent unbelief of those who have been privileged to receive the greatest amount of revelation. And even though the disciples have not rejected Jesus in the way that most others have, their failure to cast out the demon is a reflection of the same unbelief and spiritual “twistedness” that characterizes the entire generation of their day! They may exercise more faith than everyone else, but they have also received more revelation than everyone else. And the amount of revelation that they have received makes their lack of faith inexcusable, and even perverted. It was the failure *of His own disciples* that caused Jesus to cry out in the strongest of words and in the strongest of emotions: “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” May *we* not be the occasion of these words in Jesus’ mouth – though I wonder how often I am, and how often *we* are! Shouldn’t we instead be every day a source of *joy and delight and blessing* to our Savior, who gave His life for us? But Jesus was not yet finished speaking. He went on to say:

III. Matthew 17:17b-18 — “Bring him here to me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.

Behold and see how longsuffering, and patient, and merciful is our Lord Jesus Christ! In the midst of His righteous *anger*, and *frustration*, and *exasperation*, Jesus did not abandon the father and his son to their misery. If Jesus’ disciples cannot heal the man’s son, then Jesus will. “Bring him here *to Me*.” Jesus commanded. “And [He] rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.” Now did you suddenly have a wonderful feeling of relief wash over you? You see, this should not be a relief only for the father and his son, but for us as well. Because now we are reassured that the presence and reality of the kingdom is not at all in doubt. The royal authority and power of the Messiah is not one bit diminished. Satan’s demons must still obey His word. And yet even in the midst of this wonderful feeling of relief, there is a gnawing question and doubt:

IV. Matthew 17:19 — Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?”

In the Greek, the emphasis is on “we” – “Why could *we* not cast it out?” It’s one thing if Jesus is *always* there *in person*. But what about when Jesus is not there? What about when Jesus has gone away? And, of course, when Matthew was writing this Gospel for his church, Jesus *had* gone away, not just for a few hours or for a day, but this time *indefinitely* – for at least the next two thousand years. And so the question of the disciples must be the question of *the whole church*, not just in Matthew’s day but in *our* day as well! “Why could *we* not cast it out?” When the disciple of Jesus finds himself powerless to accomplish the work of the kingdom in his home, in the church, and in the world, he is faced with this one consuming question: **WHY?** Why the powerlessness? Why the lack of results? Why the failure to accomplish what Jesus Himself has

commanded us to accomplish? We may no longer doubt the power and authority of the Messiah, but the Messiah is no longer with us in person. He has gone away into heaven, and He has entrusted the work of the kingdom to us. Why, then, do we experience failure? I wonder how often we must be compelled to ask right along *with* the disciples: “*Why could we not cast it out?*” **Why?**

V. Matthew 17:20 — He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

What a wonderful and amazing verse!!! “Little faith” does not necessarily refer to a small *amount* of faith, or to the size and quantity of one’s faith. After all, Jesus says that if we have faith like a grain of mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for us, and the mustard seed is meant to represent that which is already smaller than anything and everything else. Jesus’ point is precisely this – that faith the size of a mustard seed *is* the *smallest size* that faith comes in. If it were to be any smaller it would be completely non-existent! So when Jesus refers to the littleness of the disciples’ faith, he is not referring to the quantity of their faith, but rather to the *quality* of their faith – or as D.A. Carson says, to the *poverty* of their faith. The problem is not the *amount* of their faith, but rather the *defectiveness* of their faith.

“For *truly, I say to you*, if you have faith *like a grain of mustard seed*, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” Now can’t you feel that here in these words is both a scathing rebuke, and also at the same time a *wondrous* promise and comfort? On the one hand, our powerlessness and failure to accomplish the work of the kingdom in our homes, our church, and in the world around us, is a sign that we lack even the *smallest and tiniest* amount of true faith. Can’t you feel what a scathing rebuke this is for *all* of us? Our inability to move mountains is not because we have failed to attain the status of “super Christian”. Our inability to move mountains is because we have failed to attain a faith that is even the size of a grain of mustard seed. But then we must also remember that in this scathing rebuke is a wonderful encouragement for the disciple of Jesus. *All that we need* is the very smallest variety of faith—a faith no greater than the size of a grain of mustard seed—and then we will “say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it *will* move, and *nothing* will be impossible for [us]”!

The moving of mountains is *proverbial* for doing the impossible, and at this point I must quote from Calvin:

“[Jesus] does not mean that God will give us every thing that we may mention, or that may strike our minds at random. On the contrary, as nothing is more at variance with *faith* than the foolish and irregular desires of our flesh, it follows that those in whom faith reigns do not desire every thing without discrimination, but only that which the Lord promises to give. Let us therefore maintain such moderation as to desire nothing beyond what he has promised to us, and to confine our prayers within that rule which he has laid down.”

When Jesus says “nothing will be impossible for you”, He means precisely this: “Of all the works and tasks of the *kingdom* that I have authorized and commissioned you to accomplish, *nothing* will be impossible for you.” And yet apart from *faith* they must, *all of them*, be impossible for you! I have authorized and commissioned you to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom both in word and in deed, both in preaching *and in the casting out of demons* (cf. Mat. 10:1, 8). Therefore, if you had but possessed a faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you would not have failed to cast the demon out.

So how are we to explain the disciples’ lack of faith? If for some time now they had already been successfully casting out demons, why should they have suddenly lacked the faith to cast this demon out? Did this demon appear to be more resistant than all the rest? But we can assume that the disciples expected that they would be successful this time as well! After all, they were truly surprised by their failure (“Why could we not cast it out?”) So if we’re just talking about confidence that something will happen, then we have to assume that the disciples had faith. But somehow this “faith” had become defective. *How* had this happened? What exactly was wrong with their “faith”? Well, in light of all that we have seen, it seems clear that the disciples had begun to take for granted their ability and power to do the works of the kingdom. They had begun to *expect* things from God apart from a humble trust and dependence upon God. If I’ve successfully cast out a demon ten times before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully shared the Gospel with an unbeliever before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully resisted temptation before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully confronted a brother or sister in sin before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully parented my first child, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully ministered to a hurting brother or sister before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully preached a sermon before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully taught Sunday School before, then I can do it again! If I’ve successfully engaged in a ministry or work of the kingdom before, then I can do it again! And so where we were initially full of a dependant attitude of trust and an awareness of our need to abide in Christ, now we assume that things will come *automatically* – that if it happened before, it will happen again. We simply take for granted that if God did it before, then He will do it again. And so even as we think we are exercising faith and expecting God to work, we are failing to live in a trusting relationship where we are earnestly seeking Him and depending upon Him. In Mark, when the disciples asked Jesus, “Why could we not cast it out?”, Jesus simply responded: “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but *prayer*” (Mark 9:29). So the problem was not the disciples’ lack of certainty that something would happen. The problem was that their certainty was no longer grounded in a deep and abiding trust and humble dependence upon God. D.A. Carson writes: “In Mark, Jesus tells [his disciples] that this case requires prayer—not a form or an approved rite, but an entire life bathed in prayer and its [accompanying] faith. In Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples that what they need is not giant faith (tiny faith will do) but true faith—faith that, *out of a deep, personal trust*, expects God to work.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, I wonder how much we have come to depend on our routines and rituals. I wonder how often we say to ourselves as we engage in a kingdom task: “It worked before, it will work again.” One commentator says this: “The more settled and established a church becomes, the more it needs to learn afresh that it can achieve precisely nothing without sincere dependence

on the Lord” (Green; quoted in Morris). This is true for us as a church, and this is true for each of us as individual Christians. Where we were once full of trust and humble dependence, we can so quickly come to expect automatic results. But in the Christian life, there is no magic formula, and *nothing* is *ever* automatic. Jesus would later say to His disciples:

- ✓ John 15:4–5, 7 — Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

How much is not accomplished for the kingdom in our homes, in our church, in our neighborhoods, and in our community simply because we lack *true* faith – faith that is even the size of a grain of mustard seed? But if we had faith like a grain of mustard seed, we would say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move, and *nothing* would be impossible for us.” I trust that we can fervently say together: May God grant us this faith – a faith that abides in Jesus as the branch abides in the vine, so that we may ask whatever we wish, and it will be done for us, not for our sake, but for the sake of Christ and of His kingdom.