

# ONLY BY PRAYER

*Matthew 17:14-23*

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and suffers terribly; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” And Jesus answered and said, “O you unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” And He said to them, “Because of your little faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.]” And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved. (Matthew 17:14-23)

## THE SETTING

*Matthew 16:13-17:13*

God the Father reveals to Peter and the others that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That truth is the basis for everything that Jesus came to accomplish. Jesus then announces that He had to go to Jerusalem, where He would suffer many things, be killed, and be raised on the third day. This was met with strong objections by Peter, who dared to rebuke the Lord. Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter for having his mind on human things instead of God’s things. He called His disciples to the very same kind of faithful obedience that He Himself demonstrated:

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24)

A few days later Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with Him up a mountain, where the

Lord was revealed in His glory. They have another lesson in Jesus' primacy in all things when the Father spoke to them from heaven:

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5)

**TRANSITION:** Jesus then leads Peter, James, and John back down the mountain to where the nine were waiting. He found that in His absence, a crisis had arisen.

## A DESPERATE FATHER

*Matthew 17:14-16*

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and suffers terribly; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him." (Matthew 17:14-16)

Without question, this was a terrible situation. This child had long been abused by this foul spirit. There was no answer in the natural world, but Jesus had been casting out demons from the beginning of His ministry. This father learned that Jesus is in the area and came to appeal to Him, but when he arrives, Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John. He appeals to the nine and they are unable to do anything.

## UNBELIEVING AND PERVERTED

*Matthew 17:17-18*

And Jesus answered and said, "O you unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. (Matthew 17:17-18)

Who does Jesus call unbelieving and perverse?

Some commentators believe that Jesus was rebuking the people in general. Their sin and disobedience were such that demon possession was possible.

It is more likely that Jesus was speaking of His own disciples. In a few verses, He will tell them that they were unable to cast the demon out because of the littleness of their faith. It is His disciples who have been slow to grasp the truth of His death and resurrection; every time He mentions it, they are upset and grieved. On an earlier short-term trip, His disciples had cast out demons and healed all sorts of illnesses. They even returned from that time rejoicing that demons were subject to them.

We can understand why He called them unbelieving. But why does He call them perverse? Perversion has a specific connotation in our time, but even today, the word has a broader meaning than we usually consider. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “perverse” this way: *a person, action, etc., going or disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required; contrary, fickle, irrational*. The word Jesus used means to deviate from what is considered moral, right, proper, or good.

In this passage, the focus is not on the father and his son but on the disciples. I’m grateful that we see the boy freed from his suffering and his father’s heart relieved. But that’s not why Matthew included this narrative.

TRANSITION: The nine went against what was reasonable, logical, expected, and required by God. They deviated from that which was right, proper, and good. As a result, they failed to cast out this demon. So how did they go against what was reasonable, logical, expected, and proper? How did they deviate from that which is right, proper, and good? I’m greatly encouraged that they wanted to know!

# THE QUESTION

*Matthew 17:19*

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

Can I just say that there is nothing wrong with asking why we fail? Asking for feedback is a wise thing to do. And there is nothing wrong with asking for feedback in private. Nothing in the Bible requires that we air all our failures in public. We are to be accountable, certainly, but we are to be accountable to trustworthy leaders, not everyone who comes along.

They really did trust Jesus. They knew that He would be very straight with them and wouldn't try to guard their feelings. They knew that He would tell them the truth.

Would you notice their question: Why could WE not cast it out? It's a perfectly reasonable question to ask, isn't it?

But notice the assumption they make. **They** should have been able to cast it out. **Their** failure utterly confused them.

# THE ANSWER

*Matthew 17:20-21*

And He said to them, “Because of your little faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”] (Matthew 17:20-21)

Why did they fail? Because their faith was too little. Jesus does not say that they didn't have enough faith, but that the faith they had was not big enough. There is a difference

between a small quantity of faith and faith that is too small.

A small quantity of faith would assume that faith is like water; you can have a drop of water or an ocean's worth, but it's all water. If that was the case, the disciples needed a great quantity of the same thing they already had.

Faith that is too little is like physical muscles. Everyone has the same muscles, but some have stronger muscles. The question is not how we get more faith but how our faith becomes stronger.

They were unable to cast out this demon because their faith was too little. Their faith wasn't strong enough.

What would it have looked like if their faith HAD been strong enough? Matthew 17:21 contains a manuscript variant.

[But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.] (Matthew 17:21)

## A WORD ABOUT MANUSCRIPT VARIANTS

Until the invention of the printing press, the Bible and every other written material was copied by hand. Hand-made copies will inevitably have variants. Some variants are errors, such as spelling errors and duplicating words. Some variants are deliberate. A copyist may have seen "Lord Jesus" in a manuscript and decided that it should be "Lord Jesus Christ." That creates a variant. Or, as in this case, a 5th-century copyist came to this passage in Matthew, thought about how the same story in Mark 9 ends, and decided that Matthew's Gospel should contain the same instruction.

Here are a few things to keep in mind about variants:

- Variants are inevitable when dealing with hand-copied material.
- No variants change the meaning of the text.
- Every deliberate variant was meant to strengthen or clarify the meaning of the text.
- No doctrines are determined by choosing one variant over another.

So Matthew 17:21 is not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts; in fact, it doesn't appear until the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Most modern translations don't even bother to include it, but they will have a footnote because it is including in the earlier English manuscripts, most notably the King James Version.

## IT IS FOUND IN MARK'S GOSPEL

The first part of Matthew 17:21 comes from the parallel statement in Mark 9:29:

And [Jesus] said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer." (Mark 9:29)

Jesus said nothing about fasting; that was the invention of the copyist.

**TRANSITION:** So Jesus answers their question, "Why could we not cast it out?" by telling them that their **faith** was too little, and that this kind of demon only comes out by **prayer**.

Faith and prayer are intimately connected.

## FAITH AND PRAYER

What is faith? Faith is simply you believing, trusting, and relying on God. That's all. Those who are without faith refuse to believe Him, trust Him, or rely on Him. Some say they believe Him but won't trust Him, or that they trust Him but only rely on Him. Faith requires all three qualities: believing God, trusting Him, and relying on Him.

Should we pray in faith? Of course! But there is more to prayer than praying in faith. We'll take a more in depth look at pray sometime in the future, but until that time here is a brief statement of the instructions we are given regarding prayer:

**Jesus teaches personally and through His apostles that His people:**

- those who keep the commandments and please God (First John 3:22),
  - who abide in Christ (John 15:7),
  - and who seek to bear fruit for Jesus' name (John 15:16),
- are to pray**
- secretly to the Father (Matthew 6:6) who knows what we need before we ever ask Him (Matthew 6:8).
  - in an attitude of supplication and thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6),
  - in faith (Matthew 21:22),
  - in Jesus' name (John 14:13),
  - according to the will of God (First John 5:14),
  - in agreement with other believers (Matthew 18:19),
  - without losing heart (Luke 18:1),
  - trusting that the Spirit helps our prayers (Romans 8:26).

**WHAT DOES PRAYER ACHIEVE?**

What can prayer like this achieve? Absolutely anything. Don't take my word for it; listen to Jesus:

“truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.” (Matthew 17:20)

Jesus does not say “nothing will be impossible FOR you” but “nothing will be impossible

TO you.” Nothing is impossible FOR God:

Ah Lord Yahweh! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You ... (Jeremiah 32:17)

If nothing is impossible for God, then nothing will seem impossible to those who trust Him.

In the parallel passage in Mark 9 the boy’s father says to Jesus,

“[The demon] has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” (Mark 9:22)

Jesus answers him,

And Jesus said to him, “If You can?’ All things are possible to him who believes.” (Mark 9:23)

Not “all things are possible FOR him who believes” but “all things are possible TO him who believes.” If your faith is in the Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, then nothing will seem impossible to you. God can do all things.

So let’s think about the nine disciples in light of this. The father came to them with his demon-possessed son, urging them to do something. What did they do? They tried to cast it out and failed. Why did they fail? Because their faith was too small, *and they didn’t pray*. This kind only comes out by prayer, after all. But they didn’t pray. They tried to cast the demon out as though they had authority over it. But they pray in faith that God would act. The lesson here is that it takes far more faith to pray than to act.

## THE SMALLEST FAITH IS STILL FAITH

*Matthew 17:20*



for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. (Matthew 17:20)

Faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient to move a mountain. That's because faith the size of a mustard seed is still faith, and it still calls upon God, and God does the work.

This is a terrible analogy, but it gets us pointed in the right direction. I have zero power to start my car. None whatsoever. I could exert all of my strength and will upon it and it will just sit there. But the key to my car, small as it is, CAN start it. All I have to do is use the key. Faith is like the key. My car weighs at least 3,634 pounds. The key to my car weighs 1/3 of an ounce. It would take 174,432 keys to equal the weight of my car. Yet that little key will start the car every time (if it has gas and a charge in the battery).

Now, this is a TERRIBLE analogy for two reasons.

First, the key to my car works directly on the car, but faith does not work directly on my problem. It is by faith that I call upon GOD to do the work.

And second, my car has no will. As long as there is gas in the tank and a charge in the battery, my car will start. It has no will to resist me. But God HAS a will, and what I trust Him to do must be according to His will, or He won't do it.

Let me go through that list of instructions given to us for prayer one more time.

**Jesus teaches personally and through His apostles that His people:**

- those who keep the commandments and please God (First John 3:22),
- who abide in Christ (John 15:7),
- and who seek to bear fruit for Jesus' name (John 15:16),

### are to pray

- secretly to the Father (Matthew 6:6) who knows what we need before we ever ask Him (Matthew 6:8).
- in an attitude of supplication and thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6),
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- according to the will of God (First John 5:14),
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- without losing heart (Luke 18:1),
- trusting that the Spirit helps our prayers (Romans 8:26).

This is faithful, believing prayer that God will answer. God is not a car. He knows whether we are His or not. He knows whether our aim is to obey and please Him. He knows whether we are abiding in Christ. He knows whether we want to live fruitful lives for Christ. He knows if we are praying to impress other people. He knows if we lack humility and gratitude. He knows if we don't believe. He knows if we are asking for selfish purposes rather than Christ's. He knows what His will is. He knows if we are praying in contradiction to others. He knows if we don't really care.

**TRANSITION:** As the passage comes to a close, Matthew illustrates their lack of faith.

## PROOF OF UNBELIEF

*Matthew 17:22-23*

And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day." And they were deeply grieved. (Matthew 17:22-23)

Not long before this

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (Matthew 16:20)

Why are they grieved? Because they believe Him when He said that He would be killed, but not when He said He would be raised up on the third day. Being killed is not common – most people are not put to death – but resurrection is unheard of. People don't just rise from the dead (unless Jesus is there to raise them). If Jesus is dead, who is going to raise Him? So they begin grieving for Him.

Beloved, it's not saying too much to say that faith is everything.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who draws near to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Much of Jesus' ministry with His disciples was spent weaning them off their self-reliance and teaching them to rely on God. A faithful response to Matthew 17:22-23 would be to rejoice that the purposes of God were being accomplished. The unfaithful, human, fearful, selfish response is to grieve.

## BRINGING IT HOME

We generally aren't faced with demons, but we do face countless situations that are equally beyond our ability. Evangelism is a good example.

Some believe that sharing the Gospel is like putting a key in the car. If you use the right approach, the sinner will believe. If they didn't believe, then you used the wrong approach, like trying to start your car with your house key. You need to keep trying to find the right key. But that can feel like trying to find one key in a pile of loose keys. In the dark. With gloves on. That person usually thinks to themselves, "I need to find the right way to evangelize," but

never does.

Others become disillusioned with evangelism because it doesn't seem to work. They try every key on the ring, but the car never starts up. The person doesn't want to have that conversation, doesn't respond with faith, or doesn't seem to care. That person thinks, "I guess I don't have the gift of evangelism."

The real work of evangelism isn't the talking part, it's the saving part. Our job is to talk; to share the Gospel clearly and simply. It is God's job to do the saving. Only the Spirit can give someone ears to hear, soften their heart, and grant them faith and repentance. Evangelism, just like everything else we do in the Kingdom, must be done in faith.

And what is faith? Faith is simply you believing, trusting, and relying on God. That's all it is. How can you know that you do believe that God saves sinners, that you trust God to do His work in redeeming someone, and that you rely on Him every step of the way? You will be in prayer, even while you are sharing the Gospel with that person. And if you are in prayer, beloved, then you will be content and at peace with the outcome.