

Sermons on Matthew

Mustard Seed Faith

Matthew 17:19-21

With Study Questions

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Matthew 17:19-21

**Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “_Why could we not cast it out?”⁻²⁰⁻ So Jesus said to them, “_Because of your __unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, __if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘_Move from here to there,_' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.⁻²¹⁻ __However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting
(Matthew 17:19-21).**

After the Transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James and John come down from the mountain and are greeted by a man begging for mercy. His son was possessed by a vicious demon causing him to fall into both water and fire. The boy was likely scarred by fire and could easily drown at any time.

The nine Apostles who had not been on the Mount of Transfiguration failed in their efforts at healing the boy. After a rebuke of the faithless and perverted generation in which Jesus lived, He had the boy brought to Him and cured him that very hour.

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

What’s Wrong With Me?

Twenty years of coaching, having four children, and twenty-five years in the ministry have provided an excellent tutorial regarding man’s propensity to finger-point. Everybody is anxious to blame someone else. As we grow older we become savvy enough to avoid the obvious finger-point—we may outwardly voice the George Costanza “It’s not you, it’s me” verbiage. Yet we are secretly thinking, “It’s you.”

In reality, for the most part, it’s a combination of both. Failures of teams, households, ministries, businesses are generally the result of the members rather than a single member. But the question which needs to be asked above all other questions in the face of failure is, “Why could we not...?” or “Why could I not...?”

Caviling about how much better another person can do their job is generally unproductive when it comes to ameliorating the situation. Husbands, wives, children, pastors, congregants, employees, employers, quarterbacks and lineman must first ask, “What can I do to improve the

situation?” This is not to say that there isn’t an appropriate time to confront others. But it should not happen until one has prayerfully approached Christ with the words we see uttered by the apostles, “Why could we not...?”

Let us always be willing to question our own fault.

So Jesus said to them, “_Because of your __unbelief...” (Matthew 17:20a)

Faith

Jesus pulls no punches, informing His apostles that it was due to their unbelief (_____π_____ = oligopistian--littleness of their faith)—an admonition they had already heard numerous times (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8)

Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:6).

But what is Jesus saying here? Are His apostles unbelievers? That would not only be a harsh conclusion, it would be an unreasonable conclusion. Smallness of faith is not the same as unbelief. It might be helpful here to briefly define *faith* and how it is used in the Bible.

A System of Belief

First, faith can be defined as the contents of one’s belief. Someone might ask, “What faith are you?” to which you would say, “I am of the Christian faith.” In Galatians 1:23 Paul refers to himself as one who is preaching “**the faith.**”

Three Components of Faith

In its most common usage (at least its most significant usage) faith consists of three components: knowledge, assent and trust (*Notitia, Assensus, and Fiducia*). True faith has knowledge of what is being believed, it acknowledges or assents that it is true (but of course the demons have these first two components—James 2:19) and finally there is a placement of

trust. Faith (Pistis π_____) means to be firmly persuaded or have a conviction. We see this used primarily in two ways in the Bible:

Saving Faith

For a Christian, faith is the instrument used by God to save us.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

And keep us saved:

...who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation (1 Peter 1:5).

Saving faith is a gift from God. The Westminster Confession teaches

The gift of faith makes possible for the souls of the elect to be saved by believing in Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews encourages Christians to look unto Jesus, who is the

...author (originator) and finisher (perfecter) of our faith (Hebrews 12:1b).

Faith in the context of saving faith in Jesus is something given by the grace of God. The miracles of Christ serve well to illustrate this. When He opens the eyes of the blind they see or when He opens the ears of the deaf they hear...they simply do. The power or ability to see or hear was not something they came up with through their own efforts; it was a gift from God.

That a person believes in Christ, no matter how their faith is assaulted by their own doubts, the attacks of the world or the devil is a testimony to the insurmountable love and grace of God.

True faith in this context does not overly concern itself with its own size; it turns one's mind and heart to Christ, not itself. When a child is adopted, his peace is determined not by whether or not he feels adopted, but by the actions of the ones who adopted him; these actions often include

a contract (for the sake of the illustration, a covenant or a promise) made by the adopting parents.

Our heavenly Father has made a promise which He confirmed with an oath. An oath (____—horko) means to affirm the truth of a statement by calling on a divine being to execute sanctions against a person if the statement in question is not true (in the case of a deity taking an oath, his divine being is regarded as validating the statement).¹ The author of Hebrews, seeking to encourage his readers in their hope in Christ writes,

Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to __ the heirs of promise __ the __ immutability of His counsel, __ confirmed *it* by an oath, ⁻¹⁸⁻ that by two _ immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to __ lie, we __ might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope __ set before *us* (Hebrews 6:17, 18).

So the faith which grants assurance of pardon and approval before God might be compared to a flashlight. Its design is not to shed light on itself but on something else; in this case the faithfulness of God in giving His Son to save sinners.

Active Faith

But as stated earlier, the faith Jesus is speaking of in the context of this passage in Matthew is not saving faith, which by its nature might be considered passive, something that by the grace of God becomes apparent—like having our eyes opened.

Jesus seems to be addressing the activity of faith—the action of trusting. They did not lose their saving faith, but their actions of faith, as far as it pertained to the task of removing this demon, were too small. This might be the kind of faith Paul writes of among the gifts of the Spirit.

...to another faith by the same Spirit, to another _ gifts of healings by __ the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:9).

Although some might have had the gift of faith, all should practice faith and be growing in the practice of their faith. A genuine faith in Christ

¹Louw, J. P. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (LN 33.463). New York: United Bible societies.

as Savior will necessarily be accompanied by a faith in Christ as Lord or Master. As Luther taught,

We are justified by faith alone, but the faith which justifies is never alone.

James makes the convincing argument that the kind of faith which does not produce works is not a saving faith (James 2:14-24).

So the conclusion is that the apostles, though they did not lose their saving faith or salvation, were not trusting at a sufficient level to win this particular battle. We also learn here that the power the apostles had to heal, unlike Jesus, was not inherent in themselves. Our faith should never be in even the most super of apostles but in Christ alone.

Jesus proceeds to explain the potential of active faith.

...for assuredly, I say to you, __if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘_Move from here to there,_’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you (Matthew 17:20b).

Mustard Seed Faith

At first glance there appears to be a difficulty here. Jesus just assails them for their small faith, then tells them that mustard seed faith (the least of all seeds—Matthew 13:32) is sufficient to move a mountain, and even more, nothing will be impossible.

I take it this way: Jesus moves from a gentle rebuke to words of immense encouragement. Their current mustard seed faith, as we learn in the parable of the mustard seed, does not remain small. We might understand it this way: If you have any faith at all, even the size of a mustard seed, that faith will eventually produce a redeemed world.

Moving a mountain is a hyperbole, and **“nothing will be impossible for you”** should not be thought of as Christians becoming super-heroes or gods themselves. There are damaging effects of those who interpret these types of sayings in the Bible (John 14:14 **“If you ask anything in My name, I will do it”** being another example) as if this means God will respond to our every whim or every prayer with a glowing affirmative.

All of these promises are in the context of a mission of redemption. The moving of the mountain and the **“nothing will be impossible”** are in

the context of overcoming death and the evil one in the world. The kingdom of God will prevail and the Christian's labor in the Lord are not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The gentle admonition from the lips of Jesus is quickly followed by words of encouragement regarding the end result of a faith which begins as a flicker and produces a great refining flame.

__However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21).

Fighting with Prayer

Battles with the devil are to be hard fought. Although many manuscripts do not include prayer (and fewer fasting), Mark's record of the event does include prayer (Mark 9:29).

Smallness of faith is either accompanied by, caused by, or causes negligence in prayer. In some respects prayer is a great mystery. We certainly aren't telling God something He doesn't know, nor are we making Him more merciful and loving than He would otherwise be. Yet God has determined that prayer be employed by men to bless other men and bring glory to His holy name.

Neglecting prayer while pursuing holiness and blessings for ourselves and others is no different than neglecting love, kindness, mercy, giving or any other virtue. We are to be as Jacob and wrestle with God until we receive the blessing (Genesis 32:26).

Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart; You will cause Your ear to hear (Psalm 10:17).

In one respect Christians are to be still and repose in the grace and peace of God found in the cross of Christ. We are to, as in the Lord's Supper, remember what Jesus did for us. Yet our faith such not be inert. We are to pursue holiness. We are to actively and prayerfully seek victories. We are to pray that His kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

Questions for Study

1. What is the first question we should ask in the face of difficulty or failure (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why couldn't the apostles cast out the demon (page 3)?
3. What are some ways the word *faith* is used in the Bible (pages 3-6)?
4. What are the components of faith (page 4)?
5. Discuss and define saving faith. How is it acquired? What does it do? Other (pages 4, 5)?
6. What always accompanies saving faith (pages 5, 6)?
7. In what respect did the apostles have little faith—saving or active?
8. Discuss Jesus' use of the metaphor of a mustard seed when it came to faith (pages 6, 7).
9. What are some dangers to beware when it comes to the idea of moving mountains or "nothing will be impossible." (pages 6, 7)?
10. What is a vital necessity in the Christian's battle (pages 7, 8)?