

## Real-World Faith

Matthew 17:14-21

### Introduction

**Leaving the Mountaintop:** Last week we spent the sermon looking at Jesus' transfiguration after he led his inner circle up the mountain. But after this amazing experience (revelation, glory revealed, voice from heaven, etc.) it is time for them to **come down the mountain** (as they were coming down the mountain). Do you sometimes wish you could *live* on the mountain?

**Have you ever had a spiritual mountaintop moment?** (e.g., camp, retreat, life event).

- The mountaintop moments matter because they connect us to our heavenly citizenship (e.g., miraculous birth of a baby).

But the path of the disciple takes us back down into the valley. God never meant us to live on the mountaintop. "God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited... We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader [perspective] of the earthly surroundings below. But we don't live there. We don't tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below" (Henry Drummond)

- This week we see that Jesus and the disciples came down off the mountain right into the problems of real life. They go from one extreme to the other.

Do you ever have a "case of the Mondays"? As a pastor, I've had my fair share (lots of pastors take Mondays off; I'd rather work than wallow). But our faith was not made to only exist on Sundays; it is meant to sustain and propel us through the day-in and day-out of life.

- We gather to go. We worship to fuel work (actually work is worship).
- As the disciples come down the mountain, the point of the transfiguration was to change their perspective on Jesus and his work. *Now* they have a *different angle* from which to view life's problems and have been strengthened for the task ahead.
- So much of the story has focused on Jesus' heavenly identity, his path to the cross, his future glory, resurrection, etc. but now the story steps back to reality.

I've felt this "snap back to reality" ("oh, there goes gravity"). We preach the glory of God, the beauty of the gospel, the promise of redemption but then the problems of life intrude. We see this often: it's hard for a lot of people to hear the truths of the gospel when their practical problems are all they see.

- This is a real failure on the part of many of our churches: we fail to connect the gospel to the day-in and day-out reality of our broken world.
- That doesn't mean we are preaching pragmatic sermons or trying to judge only via practical (fleshly) perspectives or only provide physical solutions but it does mean that the gospel impacts everything.
  - It affects our decisions and attitudes. It impacts our relationships and priorities. It touches every facet of our lives because Jesus is Lord of everything.

**Main Question:** What does **real-world** faith look like? (And not look like?).

<sup>14</sup> And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, <sup>15</sup> said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into

the fire, and often into the water. <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.” <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1. A Problem beyond Our Abilities (vv. 14-16)

<sup>14</sup> And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, <sup>15</sup> said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.

**A Familiar Problem:** This story identifies both the symptoms and the cause of the problem. The symptoms are a son having “seizures” and, therefore, suffering “terribly.” Jesus makes clear that the cause is a “demon” (v. 18).

- Jesus has healed many people oppressed by demons.<sup>2</sup>
- In this case, the symptom of the demon is real world pain. Here, he is suffering “seizures.”
  - The word (σεληνιαζομαι) comes from the Greek word for moon (σελήνη) because ancient folks associated the moon with supernatural power and madness (e.g., lunar and lunatic or lunacy).
- These problems and their associated symptoms make something clear: the problem is beyond their ability to solve. Their suffering is real, present, and unable to be overcome on their own.
  - Our problems are beyond us (e.g., racism, poverty, pain, decay, death, etc).

**Need a Real Solution:** In one sense, everything is spiritual and the gospel is a spiritual solution. In another sense, the gospel is the story of reality because it is God’s story.

- We have to balance the realities of the gospel now and the promises of the gospel that are to come. So we wait with patience, we endure suffering, we live for a world to come. *But* we also pursue justice now, we fight sin now, we live by the realities of the kingdom even as we await its ultimate fulfillment.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>14</sup> Καὶ ἐλθόντων πρὸς τὸν ὄχλον προσήλθεν αὐτῷ ἄνθρωπος γονυπετῶν αὐτὸν <sup>15</sup> καὶ λέγων, Κύριε, ἐλέησόν μου τὸν υἱόν, ὅτι σεληνιαζεται καὶ κακῶς πάσχει· πολλάκις γὰρ πίπτει εἰς τὸ πῦρ καὶ πολλάκις εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ. <sup>16</sup> καὶ προσήνεγκα αὐτὸν τοῖς μαθηταῖς σου, καὶ οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν αὐτὸν θεραπεῦσαι. <sup>17</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Ὡ γενεὰ ἄπιστος καὶ διεστραμμένη, ἕως πότε μεθ’ ὑμῶν ἔσομαι; ἕως πότε ἀνέξομαι ὑμῶν; φέρετέ μοι αὐτὸν ὧδε. <sup>18</sup> καὶ ἐπετίμησεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ δαιμόνιον καὶ ἐθεραπεύθη ὁ παῖς ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης. <sup>19</sup> Τότε προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ τῷ Ἰησοῦ κατ’ ἰδίαν εἶπον, Διὰ τί ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτό; <sup>20</sup> ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Διὰ τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν ὑμῶν· ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ, Μετάβα ἔνθεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ μεταβήσεται· καὶ οὐδὲν ἀδυνατήσῃ ὑμῖν.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 4:25; 8:16, 28-33; 9:33-34; 12:22-28; 15:22.

**Posture of Worship:** kneeling... “Lord, have mercy” Notice the posture of this man. He doesn’t come demanding a miracle. He comes *begging* for one. He bows down. He addresses Jesus with reverence.

- This, I think, is a very distinct contrast from response often seen from others in the gospel (e.g., Pharisees, disciples, etc.).

We see something similar with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15: “And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon’” (Matt 15:22).

- She had a problem bad enough for her to seek a Jewish teacher. She recognized something about Jesus that many others didn’t (definitely not the Pharisees and seemingly not the disciples). She has a *greater* theological understanding of Jesus than the Pharisees (e.g., Son of David *a la* Matthew 1:1). **She recognized who Jesus really is.**
  - Our acknowledgement of Jesus doesn’t change his identity, it changes us! He has always been who he is.

I think **presumption** is one of the great dangers of modern spirituality. A defining feature of authentic discipleship is humility. Jesus is the greatest example of humility (e.g., Phil 2). His entire life is one of service (even though he is the only one who could actually demand to be served).

- How often do we approach God with a deal (“I’ll do x *if* you’ll do y”). Or a demand (“There’s no way you could xyz”). Or an unfair expectation (“God would never xyz”). Or a condition (“If you love me, you’ll xyz”). That is not the heart of a genuine disciple.
- Which is why arrogant, overbearing, argumentative, “pugnacious,” people should not be leaders in Christ’s church. They are not the gatekeepers of orthodoxy or the model of faithfulness. True Christian discipleship always cultivates humility. Be very skeptical of any person who claims Christ but isn’t growing in humility.
- And it carries over into our relationship with God: we never approach God as if we *deserve* something or have *earned* something. We have no *rights* before God. Everything we have is a gift. Everything he gives is grace.
- That’s why the Apostle Paul (the greatest NT Christian?!) says in Phil 3:11 “*that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*” (literally rendered “if perhaps I might attain”).

“If we think we have anything left to ourselves, *it is not* humility. The gateway to salvation is not open unless we have laid aside all pride.” (Calvin, *edited*)

**Intercession:** Also notice who this desperate man is making this request for. Is it for himself? No, it is for his son. The heart of the gospel is “others-focused.” It even extends to our prayers (**intercessory prayer** is the primary form of NT prayer).

- Possessed people do not intercede for themselves; intercession is an act of love and compassion.
- We can’t really say we care for the hurting and the oppressed if we don’t take their needs and requests to Jesus. If you *only* pray for yourself, you do not inhabit the love for your neighbor that Jesus calls us to.

- This is the example of the Centurion, who appeals to Jesus to heal his servant (Matt 8:5-6), and the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter (Matt 15:22).

**Failure of Discipleship:** <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” There’s a big problem that, as we dig deeper, becomes even more problematic. This man brought his son to the disciples to be healed.

- Why did he go to the disciples rather than Jesus?

(1) Is it because Jesus and the inner circle were still on the mountain? Was he desperate enough that the disciples would do in a pinch?

- Have you ever needed a pro for something but settled for an amateur? Maybe you were saving a few bucks or embarking on a DIY adventure (DIY fails are quite fun; light switches in weird places; toilet in the way of the door).
  - We must be careful that we don’t turn to lesser things when only Jesus will do.
  - Don’t settle for worldly half-solutions when Jesus is the answer to your problem (your relationships, retirement account, kids, friends, hobbies, jobs, government, etc. might be great but they can never give you what Jesus gives you). Are you settling for lesser joys?
- There certainly is a world of difference between Jesus and his disciples.

(2) But these are the same disciples who were given authority to cast out demons and heal diseases by Jesus: 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 (Matt 10:1).

- The failure, here, is less about the man and more about the disciples.

## 2. A Savior We Don’t Deserve (vv. 17-18)

**Faithless Generation:** <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Again we are reminded just how far the gap between Jesus and us (disciples seem to be in mind here):

- “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (Matt 11:16-17). Nothing will ever please them. Either Jesus will be too restrictive or too joyful. Some think he is no fun (don’t do this/that), others accuse him of partying with the wrong kind of people.
  - How often do we want some Goldilocks religious leader, someone who will encourage us, boost our self-esteem but not make us uncomfortable. But there is no such thing. Jesus hasn’t come to fit into your preconceived comfort zone but to transform you according to his kingdom priorities. If you find a faith system that fits “just right” into what you want and what you’re comfortable with then, rest assured, you are worshipping yourself. You have made yourself the object of your own worship, a position you were never meant to occupy and that will most certainly come crashing down.
- We oppose Jesus **not** when we have moments of doubt (we all have those) **but** when we place our faith in ourselves rather than him; when our *doubts* became bigger than our

*trust* (that's the danger of unchecked doubt). "When we doubt something we tend to start trusting something else" (Michael Polanyi). Doubt is normal and okay but it can't have the final say. "Have you ever noticed that the phrases in our culture favor doubt over faith? We speak of "honest doubts" and "blind faith." Faith or doubt can be honest or blind? Belief (for example) is often spoken of as inferior to "science." But the reality is, "one does not learn anything except by believing something, and — conversely — if one doubts everything one learns nothing" (Lesslie Newbigin).

- "But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt 12:39; cf 16:4). How is this generation evil?
  - They seek a sign (unreasonable skepticism) even though Jesus has given undeniable sign after sign of his power and authority.

They are unfaithful (adulterous), which means they are trusting in something else (their religious tradition, their own understanding, their own righteousness or morality, etc.). Spiritual adultery is one of the best examples of sin.

- This is a path that will eventually lead to the point-of-no return. This is the hard-hearted path that spurns the grace and warnings of God to the point that, eventually, nothing will do.
  - Our culture is so inoculated against the truth; we're swimming in information yet can't come to a knowledge of the truth.
  - The worst place to be is hard-hearted to the reality of God's truth.
  - E.g. Warn your kids to floss your teeth (once the cavity forms it's too late).

**Golden Calf 2.0:** There are so many corollaries here with the disciples and the people of Israel (e.g., 12 tribes, 12 disciples). The disciples have seen all the signs and witnessed all the wonders, yet they struggle to respond in faith. The Israelites saw the salvation and provision of God, yet they complained, doubted, and wanted to return to Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

- (As Pastor James pointed out to me), there are some similarities with the Israelites and the golden calf. Remember, they thought Moses was taking too long up the mountain, so they took their jewelry, melted it and formed a golden calf to worship.
  - They had been brought out of Egypt (Red Sea, cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, plagues, etc.) yet they thought God had forsaken them.
  - God was angry and Moses was angry (made them drink the golden calf).
- This is the problem of sin: God has been faithful, he has proven himself, he has shown his goodness, and yet we are faithless and forgetful, impatient, distracted by false love and lured into worship of lesser things.

**Exasperated Jesus:** Bring him here to me." You almost sense the exasperation in Jesus. What the disciples *should have* been able to do, they weren't able to do because of their lack of faith.

- The story of Jesus' journey involves constant disappointment from those close to him. He is betrayed by one of the 12 (Judas); the three that went up the mountain to witness his transfiguration also fell asleep in the garden when he asked them to keep watch

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<sup>3</sup> Deut 32

(Peter, James, John); the most prominent disciple denied he was even a disciple when questioned outside of his trial (Peter).

However, even when we are faithless, he is faithful. Jesus endures our unbelief.

**Jesus Still Heals:** <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. Despite the shortcomings of the disciples, there is no lack in Jesus. The cure (graphically described in Mark 9:26-27) is as immediately visible as was the disciples' failure

- What a beautiful reminder: as followers of Jesus, our failures are often pointed out. It's easy for any of us to look at Christians and point to hypocrisy and sin (these are real and serious problems). But these shortcomings have no effect on who Jesus is or what he does. No discipleship failure will ever diminish the love, compassion, and perfection of Jesus.
- Here's my advice: look to Jesus more intently. The more you see his heart, the more you can follow him without fear or anxiety. **What does it look like to serve and follow Jesus, knowing that he will never let you down?**

### 3. A Lesson about Faith (vv. 19-20)

**Puzzling Lack:** <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" The disciples are puzzled by their inability. They no they were given authority to heal by Jesus himself yet they were unable. What do they lack? What happened? Their **self-esteem is bruised** after they are **publicly humiliated** (though you imagine the people are less worried than the disciples since the boy is healed). **Authority is nothing without faith.**

- We all recognize the shortcomings of positional authority (e.g., teacher, coach, politician). Having the position is a type of authority and it *sometimes* will get the job done. But having the power is more important.
  - Formal vs. informal leadership. Show muscles vs. go muscles (e.g., a pastor who actually has the characteristics of a spiritual leader not just the position; cf. 1 Tim 3: faithful husband, able to teach, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not addicted to alcohol, not a lover of money, humble, not argumentative, etc.).
  - This is why *character* beats position (e.g., structure, polity, office, etc.). E.g., rather have the wrong polity with the right character (though it's not either/or).

**Little Faith:** <sup>20</sup> He said to them, "Because of your little faith. Their lack of faith has stopped them from accomplishing what Jesus has commissioned them to do. Here, the miracle takes a backseat to the lesson on faith.

- Why do they lack faith? We don't know exactly but we can speculate based on some details. In Mark it adds the detail that this can only be accomplished with prayer (Mk 9:29).<sup>4</sup> So, it seems they were trying to heal and cast out demons with the authority they were given but without a prayerful, dependent reliance on God as the source of their power.
- I get the sense they are overconfident in their own authority, that they are **relying on their commission rather than relying on Christ.**

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<sup>4</sup> Some mss include this phrase as 17:21.

- “It is *essential* for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more *aware of your inability*; to feel your own *weakness and learn to distrust yourself*; to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God; to rest with a trustful heart in God, *relying on his help*; to take your stand in his grace” rather than your ability “*so you will understand the truth of his promises and your hope will be strengthened*” (Calvin *adapted*). E.g., fighting the lifeguard you can’t be saved; let go and relax and trust you can.

It is instructive to notice that Jesus, on multiple occasions, rebukes folks for having little faith (“O you of little faith”).<sup>5</sup> In each instance, it is the disciples who have “little faith.” Yet, when we look for those with “great faith” we see examples in the Canaanite Woman and the Centurion.

- “When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt 8:10).
- “Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (Matt 15:28).

These Gentiles (include the unclean woman with the blood disorder in Matt 9) have great faith and these disciples have little faith. What a difference! And what, in particular, is the difference?

- The way I see the Centurion and the Canaanite woman (and the man in this story) is that their faith is real and genuine and is evidence of desperation. They have no power or authority, all they have is their hope and trust in Jesus.
- Do you desperately depend on Jesus daily? Do you need him for your joy, provision, peace, rest, calling, motivation? Or is he just a nice addition to your well-managed life? Is he the cherry on top of your 10 year plan or the page your life plan is written on?

(1) If you are at the place in your life where you can’t imagine making it another day with Jesus, then you are at the right place.

(2) If you are at the place in your life where you could take Jesus or leave him, then consider whether you have ever seen and believed in who he really is because you haven’t “taken up your cross, denied yourself, and followed him.”

**Real 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.” I love the subtle and profound point Jesus makes here. Notice what the opposite of little faith is in this instance: “faith like a grain of mustard seed.” Wait a minute, I thought the opposite of little faith was big faith, but that doesn’t seem to be. **The opposite of little faith is great faith.** And what makes faith great is not its size but its object.

- Jesus has described the Kingdom of Heaven as a mustard seed as well.
- We are often confused, thinking bigger is better. Jesus isn’t calling us to grand faith, but authentic faith (i.e., real faith).

“Faith is not a measurable commodity but a relationship, and what achieves results through prayer is not a superior ‘quantity’ of faith but the unlimited power of God on which faith, any faith, can draw. The disciples, Jesus implies, had failed to bring any faith at all to bear on this situation” (France).

- This is not a magic “get-what-you-want” faith. Realize, the point of describing a mountain being moved is to show just how strong Christ is, not how strong our faith is.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20

- You can have all the faith in the world in something weak and it will mean nothing, but the smallest faith in Jesus, who is infinitely strong, is powerful.

## Conclusion

### What does **real-world** faith look like?

- It is the kind of faith that sees Jesus at the center of all of life.
- Real-world faith doesn't see Jesus as a means to an end but sees him as the goal of life. He is the treasure; he is the prize.
- It is not presumptuous or performative.
- It doesn't rely on our feeble human attempts but trusts in Jesus to provide and protect.
- It doesn't draw attention to ourselves but shows the strength of Jesus to hold us up.
- Real-world faith is faith that trusts Jesus regardless of what this world brings and, as a result, makes a difference in this world for all who encounter it.