

## A Faith that Moves Mountains and Pays Taxes

Matthew 17:14-27

Mark Vroegop

---

14 And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, 15 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. 16 And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." 17 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." 18 And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" 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."

22 As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, 23 and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

24 When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" 25 He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" 26 And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. 27 However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself" (Matt 17:14-27)

Today we are back into our series in the book of Matthew after looking at the problem of being an approval junkie. I hope that you were able to make some great progress in dealing with the problem of the fear of man. This is an important issue and one that hits a nerve and a need in our culture. This week one of our staff members sent me a link to website called [awesomereminders.com](http://awesomereminders.com) where you can purchase a \$10 per month subscription and get a phone call every day telling you that "you're awesome." Seriously! This is just another reminder that we need to keep working on this issue.

Now I want to be sure that you don't make too large of a distinction between our previous series and our study of Matthew. Here's why: having a Biblical understanding of who you are in Christ, what God calls you to be and do, and what promises you should live by is built one Sunday at a time. In other words, while we are not talking specifically about how to defeat the fear of man, our text is part of the Biblical grid through which you should see yourself, others and life in general. Every Sunday the Word speaks to our lives!

## **The Enigma of Matthew 13-17**

Today we are wrapping up a 13 message series called Enigma that has taken us through chapters 13-17 of the book of Matthew. Next week we'll begin a new series on chapters 18-20.

We began this section of Matthew in May, and it has taken us through some great sections of Scripture:

- The purpose of the parables (13:10-16)
- Parables of the Sower, Weeds, Mustard Seed, Leaven, Hidden Treasure, Pearl of Great Price and the Dragnet (13:1-9, 17-50)
- The rejection of Jesus and the martyrdom of John the Baptist (13:50-14:12)
- Miracles of feeding large groups of people (14:13-21, 15:32-39), walking on water (14:22-33), and the healing of a pleading woman (15:21-28)
- Growing animosity with the Pharisees (15:1-20, 16:1-12)
- Compelling identifications as to who Jesus is: "You are the Christ" (16:13-20), and what following him really means to follow him: "Take up his cross and follow me" (16:24-28)

Through all of these passages we've seen Jesus emerge as a bit of an enigma. His words and actions do not always create clarity. And that is by divine design (see Matt 13:15).

However, in our last passage (Matthew 17:1-13) we saw Jesus very clearly. The text highlighted the transfiguration of Jesus where the veil of his humanity was lifted and three disciples were able to see the beauty of who he really is. In this text we saw the affirmation of Old Testament heroes like Moses and Elijah, and we heard directly from the Father "This is my beloved Son...listen to Him" (17:5). It was a great moment, and Peter, James, and John did not want to leave.

### **Real-World Christianity**

Unfortunately, every mountain-top experience must come to an end, and our text today highlights the back-to-reality tension of being a follower of Jesus. The disciples and Jesus come down from the mountain only to find the failure of some disciples to deliver a demon-possessed boy, to hear about the dark future for Jesus, and to be questioned about the payment of taxes. The diversity of the issues that come at Jesus and his disciples is remarkable. Yet this is what being a follower of Jesus involves: a strange mixture of faith and discernment, hard lessons and seemingly trivial questions.

Our text shows us the real-world tension of being a follower of Jesus. It shows us that there are sometimes that the followers of Jesus are called to exercise great, powerful faith, and other times we are called to exercise wisdom and to be discerning. And once again we see how different Jesus is from his followers. Let's see what we can learn:

## 1. A God-Dependent Faith (v 14-21)

As Jesus comes down from the mountain he is confronted by a father who is deeply distressed. We learn from verse 14 that this man came reverently to Jesus (kneeling before him and calling him "Lord"), and appeals to him about the needs of his son. Verse 15 captures what he 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."

There is some debate as to what exactly was wrong with the boy and how you should translate the word that ESV renders "epileptic." The word literally means moon-struck because it was thought that the rise of the moon created a greater abnormality and crazy-like behavior in the person. The NIV translates this word as "seizures," and Mark's account in 9:17-18 says:

"Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 18 And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid."

Whatever word you choose it is clear from the text that his condition is dangerous, and it was more than a disability; it was connected to demon possession. But his condition, while serious, is not the real problem in the passage. The issue is the fact that the disciples have not been able to heal the boy (v 16). In fact, Mark 9:16 tells us that Jesus happens to come upon them as they are arguing with the scribes, presumably about the fact that they were powerless to deliver the child. Now this would have been an embarrassing moment for the disciples. After all, Jesus had already given them the charge to heal diseases, cast out demons, and to exercise authority over unclean spirits (see Matt 10:1). Luke 10:17 tells us that they had great success, and they were filled with joy that even the demons were subject to them in his name.

The situation is disappointing for everyone – for the father, for the disciples, and for Jesus. We pick up on this by Jesus' response. Here's what he said:

"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" (Matt 17:17).

He sounds burdened and discouraged. Fredrick Bruner in his commentary says, "At the top of the mountain he shone and glowed; at the foot of the mountain he moans and groans."<sup>1</sup>

What is Jesus saying here? There are three things to note in reverse order in text:

---

<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Bruner, The Churchbook – Matthew 13-28, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 188.

- Jesus is expressing the honest tension that he feels between his mission and the spiritual shallowness of his followers. The press of broken world hit his humanity. Jesus is weary.
- He identifies that this generation is twisted which means that their spiritual attitude or their thinking is out of line.
- But it is the very first thing that he says that is so important: he calls them faithless. This means that they have a wrong perspective, an under-developed trust, and they were lacking the faith through which God loved to work.<sup>2</sup> This is by far the most important point.

The uncured boy is directly connected to fact that the disciples' spiritual moorings were off. Something didn't work. We'll find out why in just a minute. But for now just note that in verse 18 Jesus quickly and easily healed the boy despite the disciples' previous failure.

Of course the disciples are now curious. What did they miss? What should they have done differently? They ask him directly in verse 19, and Jesus gives them a straight answer in verse 20:

"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."

Now this passage presents a challenging problem: how literally do we take this passage? Is Jesus saying here that if you just have enough faith that anything that you believe will be possible? In other words, what was deficient about the disciples' faith such that Jesus said this, and what are the implications?

First, you have to see that in general Jesus is speaking in metaphor and hyperbole. He indicates that a small amount of faith – the size of a grain of mustard seed – could be powerful enough move a mountain. Now, I don't think that Jesus is literally talking about a new form of excavation. Therefore, I think that Jesus' next comment – "nothing will be impossible for you" – needs to be understood in this hyperbole context. In other words, Jesus is not giving his disciples a blank "faith" check on anything that they want.

So what is his saying? I think that part of the key to understanding this passage is found in a textual footnote in your ESV Bible and Mark 9. Did you notice that there is no verse 21? That is because many manuscripts do not contain this verse, and it is likely that some scribe added it trying to solve this problem. Why would they do that? Because of what we find in two places in Mark 9.

---

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 447.

23 And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24).

28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer (Mark 9:28-29).

When you read these passages you begin to see two things emerge: belief and prayer. And I think that the faith which Jesus is talking about in Matthew 17 is connected to these two words. In other words, I think that the problem with the disciples' inability to heal this boy likely has something to do with their lack of believing prayer. It seems likely that the malfunction of their ministry came about because they lost a level of God-dependency. That is why Jesus moans and groans. That is why he calls this generation "faithless and perverse." They apparently were not trusting in God like they had before, and Jesus uses this as an example to drive home the importance of faith, belief, and prayer.

Let me state it positively because that is really the main point. I'll put it in two short sentences: Nothing is impossible for God. If you believe this, then pray like it!

If you don't believe, you'll never pray. And if you don't pray, than you really don't believe. Therefore the problem with the disciples here is a fundamental belief problem, or lack of dependency on God or, a Jesus calls it, faithlessness. Therefore, the call here is for a God-dependant faith.

The disciples had been given the charge in Matthew 10. They were called to act, in faith, on the clear command of Jesus. And Jesus said that if they had just a small amount of true belief in that great power would be unleashed.

## **Living by Faith**

Now I cannot just leave this passage there. I need to go one step deeper because this passage is often misused. Let me give you a few lessons from this text:

1. **You have to know God's commands from His Word or your faith is baseless.** In order to trust in the promises of God you have to know what they are.
2. **Faith is a gift (Eph 2:8-9) so that you can believe and as evidence that what you believe is real (Hebrews 11:1).** God gives you faith and with it you believe in Him.
3. **Prayer and belief are inseparable.** Prayer is like breathing and belief like your lungs. Your lungs were made to breathe, and breathing is a sign that that your lungs are functioning. Therefore, believe and pray!

4. **Pray the Bible.** Is there anything that you think is impossible? Take God's word and take your request to the Lord.
5. **Don't assume that a little faith is a bad faith.** I love the fact that Jesus said that faith the size of a mustard seed is powerful, and I love that the Father in Mark 9 said, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Real-world Christianity is a life of faith where we believe God's word. It is a life of God-dependency, based upon the work of Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But this is not the only part. It involves another arena.

## 2. A Man-Deferring Discernment

Let me say from the outset that this is a strange series of verses, and it seems that Matthew wants us to see two different aspects of Jesus before we move into a new section in his gospel. It couldn't be any more different than the previous section on faith. It shows us a very practical, deferential, and humble side of Jesus.

Verse 24 tell us that when the party of Jesus and his disciples came to the city of Capernaum, a collector of the half-shekel tax inquired of Peter as to whether or not Jesus paid this particular tax. This tax was the temple tax, and it was an obligatory contribution that each Jewish male paid around the time of the Passover. It is based loosely on Exodus 30:11-16 where the Israelites paid a ransom for their lives as a method of supporting the tabernacle. Those who traveled to Jerusalem during Passover paid it personally, and that is why there were money changers in the temple court yard (see Matthew 21:12-13). However, those who were further away paid the tax in the month leading up to Passover.

Apparently the tax had not been paid yet, and that is why the man is asking Peter this question. It was a subtle reminder about the required tax. Peter responds affirmatively, indicating that Jesus certainly pays the tax (although he does not know this for sure).

When Peter arrives back in the house, Jesus uses the moment as a teaching opportunity. He asks him a question about the custom of taxing sons.

"What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" 26 And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free (Matt 17:25-26).

Jesus is pointing to the fact that the sons of the king were not taxed by the king since they are not his subjects but his sons. The implication as it relates to Jesus here should be obvious. Since he was the Son of God, the tax for the temple didn't apply to him. This is yet another example of Jesus asserting his deity and his rightful place in God's economy. He is the Son of God, and it really is almost offensive to charge him a tax. It would be like my children setting

up a lemonade stand in front of my house, using my tables, chairs, lemonade mix, and refusing to give me a drink of lemonade unless I paid 25 cents.

But notice what Jesus says next:

However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself" (Matt 17:27).

Apparently Jesus' refusal to pay this tax would have made a bit of a problem. The Greek word here is *skandalizo* which means to be offensive or a stumbling block, and Jesus did not want to have his actions to create that kind of situation. He did not want to give the impression that he was not a "temple-man," or that he did not pay his debts, or put the collector in a difficult position. Therefore, he finds a creative way to pay the tax. He sends Peter to the sea to catch a coin-filled fish.

If you put all of this together it really is a remarkable moment that shows us both tension of living in the real world and the beauty of what Jesus is all about.

The tax is such a trivial issue. Yet Jesus chooses to exercise great discernment and self-effacing actions. Jesus is not about claiming his rights. He will not allow the Pharisees to push him around with their silly man-made rules. He takes them on strongly. But here he chooses to find a way to live such that he's not a stumbling block to the people. This is a real-world balance that we have to work out.

For example:

- When do you claim your freedom in Christ versus yielding your freedom in love for another?
- When do you argue a point verses when do you simply choose to "let it go"?
- When do you confront something verses when do you cover it in love?
- When is something an act in faith versus a matter of presumption?
- When do you leave something in God's hands verses take active steps on your own?

When do you pay the tax? When do you claim your right? This is real-world Christianity of what it means to follow Jesus. We need help here, don't we? I think that this is the very reason why Jesus said this to his disciples:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you (John 14:15-17).

25 "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:25-26).

The beautiful news is that the followers of Jesus have not been left abandoned, we've been given the empowering presence of Christ through the Spirit of God! So when you are confused and wondering what you should do or when you are wondering what to do remember that you've got the personal presence of Jesus with you. Ask the Spirit of the risen Christ to help you, to help you pray right, think right, live right. "Walk by the Spirit, you will not fulfill the lust of the Flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

### **A Gospel-Centered Life**

Now there is one more thing that I must say. As I was studying this section of Scripture, I couldn't help but see an amazing parallel. Jesus decides to not claim the right of who he really was when considering a tax whose history is rooted in the ransom tax of Israel's history. And he chooses to pay this tax so that he will not be a scandal to the people.

You may have noticed that I skipped verses 22-23. I did so because I wanted to end with these verses. We will see in the coming chapters of Matthew the way in which Jesus will be treated as anything but the Son of God. He will be maligned, mistreated, abused, mocked, and killed as a criminal. His death will become a scandal as his crucifixion is viewed as the displeasure of God. And it was this self-less, scandalous death which became the ransom for those who put their faith in him. Amazing, isn't it?

It is no wonder that the author of Hebrews told believers not to grow weary with all the difficulties that they were facing to "look{ing} to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

This is the Jesus to whom you say, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief."

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)