

Matthew 17:14-23 – Faith like a Mustard Seed

Unexplained Failure

Every morning at 7am, a small village in Wales would lose their internet. This problem was puzzling engineers for 18 months. They just couldn't figure out why this was happening. They investigated the issue, tested the cables, even replaced cables to see if that was the problem. But every morning, like clockwork the broadband would stop working. They were just unable to figure out the problem.

They eventually brought in a crack squad of engineers from the Chief Engineers office, who were based in other parts of the UK. They tried everything, and then thought that maybe another appliance is causing some electrical interference. It's something called SHINE – Single High-level Impulse Noise. So they got a special monitor to pick up this electrical noise, and walked up and down the streets.

And sure enough, at 7am they got a huge burst of this noise. They tracked it to a house, and they discovered that at this time every morning a resident would turn on their old Cathode Ray Tube (CRT) TV. You know the big, curved ones they had before flat screens? The interference from this one TV knocked out the internet for all 130,000 residents of this village.

Well in today's story, Jesus' disciples just can't understand why they can't cast out a demon from a young boy. And Jesus is the only one who can see to the heart of the problem. It's a spiritual problem of a lack of faith. As we look at this passage, we'll see that we all have this problem. And only Jesus, the spiritual engineer, can fix it. We learn a lot about ourselves and Jesus from this passage. Firstly, we see that people are corrupt and unbelieving. Secondly, we can do nothing without faith in Jesus. And thirdly, Jesus gives us the power of his coming kingdom.

1. People are corrupt and unbelieving

The story just before this one has Jesus appear in all his glory on a mountain. And as he comes down the mountain, a man comes up to him and kneels before him. He begs for mercy for his son, who is an epileptic. But this is not just a medical problem, because he had a demon. And it seems the demon was trying to destroy the boy, often throwing him into fire and into water.

The man explains that he first brought his son to the disciples – that is the nine who were left when Peter, James and John went up the mountain. But these disciples were unable to heal him. They didn't have the power to do it. As we'll see, power is going to be important in this story.

And Jesus is clearly frustrated by this situation. Look at what he says in v. 17:

Matthew 17:17 *“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.”*

This is a surprising side of Jesus isn't it? Often we think of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But he is anything but gentle here. He is frustrated. Almost grumpy. You really see his raw, human emotion coming out here. 'Bring the boy here to me,' he says. Why is he so frustrated?

Well the inner circle have just seen Jesus shine in his divine glory. Jesus has enjoyed talking with the great heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah. And he has basked in the glory and pleasure of God his Father. It's a real mountaintop experience. But then he goes from the heights of heaven, to the disappointment of humanity. The horrible situation of the boy who is being attacked by the demon. The lack of faith and perversity of people. Even his own disciples couldn't heal the boy. It was impossible for them to do it.

And this is not just a failure of strength. But a failure of faith and even morality. He calls them a perverse generation. Who is he talking about? Well firstly the disciples, for they were unable to cast out the demon. But then he talks about the whole generation. He's actually talking about the problem of all human beings.

We don't trust God, and we don't *want* to follow God. From the beginning, we doubted God's goodness in the garden of Eden. We didn't believe his Word that we would die if we disobeyed Him. And we chose to decide what's right and wrong for ourselves, rather than accepting God as the ruler.

That's why sin, and evil, and sickness entered the world. The demon-possessed boy is a picture of all humanity. We are under the power of the devil, and our corrupt natures lead us away from God, and into harm and ruin. We are bent and broken. You might not like what Jesus says here. But Jesus didn't come to tell us what we want to hear. But to tell us the truth, so we might be set free.

Sin has so corrupted our natures, that we think of every other solution to our problem, apart from turning to God to help us. We think we can fix the world's problems through better education, politics; through better health or nutrition. But our biggest problem is that we are separated from God. Because we are spiritually blind, we can't even see that our biggest problem is spiritual. So we can't find lasting solutions.

Only Jesus can help us... And he does! Even though we see how frustrating it was for him to bear with our fallen nature, he does bear with us. Jesus rebukes the demon, and it comes out of the boy immediately. Jesus has perfect spiritual sight, and supreme power over the spiritual realm. And he patiently heals us.

2. We can do nothing without faith in Jesus

Now the disciples come to Jesus privately. Maybe they're ashamed that they couldn't cast out the demon. And they ask him why they were not powerful enough to cast it out. After all, they had cast out evil spirits in Jesus' name before. Chapter 10 tell us that Jesus gave his Apostles authority to cast out unclean spirits, and to heal every disease and affliction. Why can't they do it now?

Matthew 17:20 *He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

See they were starting to take their focus off Jesus. They were the Apostles, after all. They had done this so many times before. And Jesus had gone up the mountain. Maybe they started to think they could do these amazing miracles by themselves, without Him. As if it's a magical power they now had in themselves.

But we see here that they can do *nothing*, without faith in Jesus. Now this is a bit confusing, because Jesus seems to say it's because they have small faith, but then says all you need is faith as small as a mustard seed. You can't get much smaller than that! Well firstly, he's not saying the size of their faith is the problem. That first word can be translated as 'weak' faith. It's their lack of faith that's the problem.

That's why a mustard seed is such a good example. The point of a seed is that it can do nothing by itself. It needs soil to grow in. The mustard seed is small, and completely dependent on the soil for all the energy it needs to grow to maturity. The same is true of us: we need faith that relies completely on the power of God, not in ourselves.

See it's not how big our faith is, but what our faith is in. Lots of people think that faith is like a substance or quality that some people have. They say things like, 'Oh I wish I had your great faith!' But you can have strong, committed, unwavering faith that is absolutely useless.

You can believe with all your heart in a pair of paper wings. Now as solid as your faith is, and as hard as you beat those wings, it doesn't matter. It is impossible to fly by flapping paper wings. On the other hand, you can have tiny faith and still get on a plane. And the plane will soar above the clouds. The size of your faith will make no difference to how high the plane flies. It's completely dependent on the strength and design of the plane itself. So it's not about how big your faith is, but the **faithfulness** of the One you are trusting. If we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, he will save us and take us to his heavenly kingdom. But without him, we can do nothing. As Jesus says in John,

John 15:5-7 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Without Jesus we can't do anything spiritually. But if we remain in him, we can do amazing things in his name.

3. Jesus gives us the power of his coming kingdom

Now notice what Jesus said in the last verse we read out. If you have faith like a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move. Now it's obvious he's exaggerating a bit. Moving mountains was picture language for doing something that's impossible. And in the context, what is the power that Jesus has given his Apostles? It is the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Remember when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God? That simple faith in who Jesus is, is what builds his church. He gave Peter and the other Apostles the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Because he entrusted the gospel message to them.

So here, when he says, 'nothing will be impossible for you.' He's not saying you'll be able to arm-wrestle the Hulk. He's saying, 'You will even have the power to open up the gates of heaven for others to enter in.' And even though we are not eye-witnesses, we have the gospel they received in the Bible. So we too can do the impossible, and make it possible for sinners to enter the kingdom of a holy God.

But I wonder if there's more to it. Now this is just my opinion, but when he talks about moving mountains, where has he just been? Up a mountain with Moses and Elijah. They are the two biggest figures of the old covenant. The old covenant was all about keeping the law and obeying God. Moses went up the mountain and received the 10 commandments. And if you were a Jew the biggest barrier to your relationship with God was the law. It was a constant reminder of your sin and God's holiness.

But now Jesus has come to bring a new covenant, based on grace. All we have to do is have faith in Jesus, and we will be saved. In a sense, simple faith in Jesus moves the mountain of the law and gives us direct access to his throne of grace. But again, this is just a possibility and I maybe I'm reading too much into moving mountains! But the main point is that simple faith in Jesus opens up the way into Jesus' kingdom... Now Jesus shows how committed he is to opening up this kingdom for us.

Matthew 17:22-23 *When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.²³ They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.*

Even though humanity is lacking in faith, spiritually blind and weak, Jesus lovingly gave his life to save us. And, unlike us, he has perfect faith. It was not easy to go through human suffering and death on a cross. We see his human struggle in this passage. But he trusts his Father completely to raise him from the dead.

He reminds his disciples that it is only his death and resurrection that will accomplish this great salvation. But the disciples still don't get it. They are so focussed on *this* life. They feel down because Jesus is going to die. But they don't really hear the part about him being raised to life again.

The disciples don't get it. Throughout this passage, they focus on their own abilities and are confused when they can't perform miracles. They focus on Jesus' earthly life, and they are sad that Jesus is going to die. And if we were there we would be just as confused, and just as spiritually blind. For as Jesus told Peter, 'this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 16:17).

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that what Jesus was doing was giving the Apostles amazing spiritual power. The power to open up the gates of heaven through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we have the same power. When we tell someone the gospel, we are giving them the chance to go from death to life. From earth to heaven. To go from being judged for their sin, to being given forgiveness and eternal life. But will we open up our mouths, and trust Jesus to do the impossible?

It may be that you feel really spiritually weak at the moment. You don't feel like you trust Jesus with your life. You might not even feel like you want to. Well we don't have the power to heal ourselves. It is God who works in our hearts to turn to him and trust him. So start by crying out to God and asking him to help you *want* to trust him. For be assured, that despite all our weakness and failure, Jesus still loves us.

When Jesus came down from his heavenly glory, he found a faithless generation. What will he find in your life the next time he comes down? Let's pray.