Limited Resources, Limitless God
Session 1
December 7, 2025

When Your Faith Falls Short

The Point: A faith that looks to Jesus is a powerful faith.
Session Passage: Matthew 17:14-20

Matthew 17:14-16

Connection to the Point: Jesus's disciples did not have the faith to heal.

The Setting. The first part of the chapter recaps the scene of the Transfiguration on a mountain (most likely Mount Hermon) just to the north of Caesarea Philippi. Here, a select group of disciples experienced confirmation of Jesus's ministry as His persona and His clothes changed appearance in anticipation of His glory after the ascension. Moses and Elijah, representing the law and prophets, appeared and talked with Jesus. Peter thought they should stay on the mountain and offered to build three shelters for them. As he spoke, a cloud covered them and God spoke from the cloud identifying Jesus as His Son and commanding them to listen to Him.

The healing story that followed served to contrast Jesus's healing power as He depended upon God in the face of the lack of believing faith and prayer on the part of the disciples. As Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, descended from this mountaintop experience, the scene shifted from a vision of glory to a jarring scene of chaos.

When they reached the crowd (v. 14). Following the mountaintop experience, Jesus and three of His disciples crashed into the misery and suffering of the everyday world. In his Gospel account, Mark offered that the crowd met Jesus with amazement (Mark 9:15), probably at His sudden appearance after a night's unexplained absence. The boisterous mob gathered around a distressed father who had brought his epileptic son to the remaining disciples, seeking deliverance from the boy's affliction. The disciples had failed to help the man's son. Some teachers of the law sought to discredit the disciples who had tried and failed to cast out a demon.

A man approached and knelt down before him (v. 14). The man drew near with great respect. The combination of terms demonstrated an obvious show of homage but also a posture of begging desperation. However, this hardly meant that this father understood Jesus's true mission and purpose nor had he knelt downas an act of worship. This man came to talk with Jesus about his son, someone he loved and who would receive his inheritance. This son represented his hope for the next generation.

"Lord," he said, "have mercy on my son (v. 15). By using this term, the father likely meant nothing more than to show respect for Jesus as a rabbi and someone who might heal his son. One can imagine it must have grieved this father to watch helplessly as his only son (the definite article present in the original language suggested "the son of the family") groveled in the dust twisting grotesquely. The father prostrated himself before Jesus and begged Him to do something, literally to show this boy mercy or compassion. Since the disciples had failed to help his son, the desperate father may have harbored some doubts that Jesus could do anything (Mark 9:22). The man had turned to Jesus as his last hope.

Because he has seizures and suffers terribly (v. 15). Mark's description of the boy's seizures were that he was "unable to speak," "foams at the mouth," "grinds his teeth," and "becomes rigid" (Mark 9:17-20), all symptoms which point to epilepsy. These episodes also included "shrieks" and "convulsions" (Luke 9:39). Matthew used the word seizure to describe his son's affliction. The term literally meant "to be moonstruck" and came into use from the superstitious belief that the moon influenced these kinds of behaviors at monthly intervals. However, from Mark's account (Mark 9:17-18), the cause behind the boy's affliction is identified as "a spirit" while Matthew's account identifies it as a demon (Matt. 17:18).

He often falls into the fire and often into the water (v. 15). Matthew added that the lack of motor control during the son's convulsive fits made these attacks particularly life-threatening because of the danger of him falling into an open fire or drowning in a open courtyard well. The poor father constantly had to watch his son in order to protect him and had probably snatched him away from danger many times.

To summarize his son's circumstances, he could not speak or hear, and was demon-possessed. While Matthew did not specify the exact relationship between his demon-possession and the other diseases, Mark's and Luke's accounts clearly identify the source of the various symptoms to the influence of a spirit (Mark 9:17-18; Luke 9:39).

I brought him to your disciples (v. 16). Having heard that Jesus had previously cast out demons, the man came to where He had been last seen hoping that his son might be delivered. This is the first time in Matthew's Gospel that a person with a malady was brought to Jesus's disciples rather than Jesus Himself in the hopes of experiencing a healing. The father obviously hoped that Jesus's disciples could perform the same miracles as Jesus Himself.

But they couldn't heal him (v. 16). The disappointed father explained that the nine disciples had failed to heal his son. In Matthew 10, when Jesus commissioned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority to cast out demons and heal every disease and illness. Doubtless they had cast out demons during their mission in Galilee. However, the disciples whom Jesus had left at the foot of the mountain now stood by unable to heal the man's son due to their weakness of faith (v. 20). These nine disciples did not have the faith to heal, perhaps because they failed to remain connected to Jesus through prayer and meditating on what He had told them (John 15:5). Their impotence increased the father's distress and anxiety. Seeing that Jesus had returned from the mountain, the father turned to Him in desperation hoping that He would free his son from the seizures. Every aspect of this narrative underscores not only the failure and inability of the disciples but also the great ability and surpassing power and greatness of Jesus.

Matthew 17:17-18

Connection to the Point: Jesus rebuked their lack of faith.

Jesus replied, "You unbelieving and perverse generation" (v. 17). Jesus's response likely caught everyone off guard. Fed up with unbelief, He cried out in exasperation and exploded with indignation. His first words carry a particularly biting admonition and served to set Jesus against the crowd that had gathered at the base of the mountain, including the father and his son, the curiosity seekers, the teachers of the law, and even the nine disciples who had not gone with Jesus and the others to Mount Hermon. Jesus rebuked the entire throng as belonging to a wicked generation of people. Jesus railed against them as having the wrong attitude toward God when Scripture urged people to trust in Him. By calling them perverse, Jesus labeled them all as twisted in their thinking and morally crooked or corrupted in their spiritual attitudes. No one, not even the nine disciples, could do anything for the boy. No wonder they could not cure the troubled boy!

How long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you? (v. 17). Fed up with their unbelief and lack of faith, Jesus expressed His exasperation with these two questions. He may have directed the first question to His disciples, thereby providing a glimpse of His challenge of having to put up with His disciples' lack of faith and understanding. His rebuke and questions follow immediately after the statement of the disciples' inability and may reveal Jesus's exasperation as well as pointing to the nearness of the culmination of His earthly ministry.

While Jesus and the other three disciples experienced the spiritual high of the Transfiguration, the remaining nine disciples had knuckled under the unbelieving influence of the crowd. Previously, Jesus had given them the authority over unclean spirits and to heal every disease and sickness (Matt. 10:1), but they failed to depend on God's power to perform this miracle.

The combined impact of the questions likely point to Jesus's frustration and should be seen as an indictment. But He may have aimed them at the scribes in particular, since as Jesus and the three disciples came down, the scribes engaged in a deep argument with the other disciples (Mark 9:14). They had taunted the disciples about their inability to help the man. Their hardened unbelief led the scribes to become so perverse that they took delight in witnessing the failure of the disciples to help this young man and his father rather than having compassion for them.

Bring him here to me (v. 17). When the father saw Jesus returning, he had rushed to meet Him leaving his son behind. Now having made His complaint, Jesus would not leave the young boy in the power of the demon and turned His attention to the boy, telling the father to bring his son to Him.

Then Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and from that moment the boy was healed (v. 18). As soon as the boy arrived, Jesus commanded the demon to leave with a sharp rebuke and moved to bring the exorcism to a speedy conclusion. Just as when Jesus rebuked the wind and waves, resulting in immediate calm seas (Matt. 8:26), when He rebuked the demon it immediately abandoned the boy. Mark described the demon coming out of the boy in a rage and convulsed him one last time, leaving him limp from physical exhaustion. Most in the crowd thought he had died until Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up (Mark 9:26). Jesus's authority over the demon contrasted the inability of the disciples to perform the exorcism.

The verbs, "rebuked," "came out," and "was healed" all indicate simultaneous action and not sequential results. In other words, as soon as Jesus rebuked the demon, it departed, and the boy was immediately and permanently cured. The demon did not dillydally or mull over his options. He had no other choice. Jesus's authoritative word completely overwhelmed and overcame the demon, and it obeyed Him instantaneously.

Matthew 17:19-20

Connection to the Point: The presence of faith is what matters, not the amount of faith.

Then the disciples approached Jesus privately and said (v. 19). The disciples had tried and failed heal the young man. Although not as detailed in Matthew's Gospel because he only marked the transition with a single word translated as "then," Jesus and His disciples removed themselves from the crowd and entered a house (Mark 9:28). Given their ineffectiveness, they huddled around Jesus to find out why. This marked the beginning in Matthew of several private gatherings of Jesus with His disciples where they would come to Him with their questions seeking greater understanding (Matt. 13:10,36; 18:1; 24:3).

Why couldn't we drive it out? (v. 19). Obviously, this question came from one of the disciples who missed out on being alone with Jesus on the mountain. Matthew used the first person plural pronoun "we" emphatically since Jesus had authorized them all to drive out demons (10:1-8). Their ineffectiveness only increased their confusion. Since they had done so in the past, they wanted to know why they had failed this time.

Because of your little faith (v. 20). Jesus attributed their failure to their little faith. The singular word translated as "little faith" appears only here in the New Testament. However, Jesus referred to the quality of their faith rather than the quantity of their faith demonstrated with the comparison which followed. They did not have miracle working faith because they had treated the power granted to them to cast out demons as a kind of magic power. They trusted in their past experiences or in their own ability, thinking, "We have done this before, and we can do it again," rather than in the One that had empowered them. Therefore when they spoke to the demon with their little or doubting faith, the evil spirit had power to resist them.

Overcoming their "little faith" would come only through hungering and thirsting after God and by remaining in His presence. Their separation from Jesus during His time on the mountain may have caused them to lose their focus on God and place it on themselves to accomplish the work of ministry. This led to their failure.

For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed (v. 20). This phrase stressed the importance and authority of Jesus. Literally, the phrase meant "Amen I tell you" or "I am telling you the truth." Jesus balanced His rebuke with an optimistic tone by promising that even a small amount of faith in the Lord can work miracles. Using an expression for the smallest thing imaginable for them, He told them that they did not need to possess great faith because small faith placed in God would prove to be more than enough for miracles to occur. Though the boy's father did not have much faith ("If you can do anything," Mark 9:22), he possessed at least enough for Jesus to act. God will honor even a little faith. The idea of faith the size of a mustard seed not only included the size or amount of faith but also faith's potential to grow. Faith can grow when nurtured and cultivated. As faith grows, the potential for God-sized results exist.

You will tell this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move (v. 20). The hyperbolic language—the small mustard seed and the massive mountain—laid the groundwork for this episode's application. One need not imagine Jesus pointing to Mount Hermon telling it to move and the disciples waiting for it to happen. No doubt, He intended this to be understood metaphorically, yet it underscored the object of the believer's faith.

Nothing will be impossible for you (v. 20). When Jesus said this, He had in mind His life assignment for them. They would preach the gospel and would accomplish many miraculous things for the Kingdom of God, but they would not literally move mountains.

As Jesus and His disciples reflected on the events of the day, this lesson on faith had a key takeaway point: their lack of faith had crippled their usefulness to meet the young man's need. The nine disciples would remember what they did and what they did not do. They would see how their lack of faith played into their inability to meet the needs of this family.

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