

Series: Lent: The Power of the Gospel	Reference: Matthew 17:14-20	Title: The Reliance of Self	Date: 04.03.2022
Website Writeup:			
<p>In this story Jesus exorcises a demon from a young boy. One which the Disciples were unable to drive out. As a result, Jesus reprimands them for their failure to trust the One to whom they ought to be praying, but don't. It would seem they may act in religious ways, but their faith was not placed rightly in prayer - theirs was demonstrated in the reliance of self. But prayer in relationship with Jesus demonstrates a relationship of practical trust in His power to accomplish more than we might ever imagine.</p>			

COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

Turn with me to Matthew 17:14-20, p670 in your pew Bibles. Hold your place there since I want to speak about a few things before we lean into the passage...

A few weeks back we studied the faith of the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8. A story in which Jesus was impressed by faith. He'd said of the Centurion, *"Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."* He went as far as to compare the religious looking Israelites surrounding Him to that Roman Centurion. He stated they wouldn't find a place in the kingdom of God, but that those who demonstrate faith like the Centurion would. A hard thing to hear for those expecting a Messiah to come with military power to destroy Rome, and not to save Romans which Israelites deemed to be dirty Gentile dogs.

Going back further in history, we remember in Isaiah 1 God said to Israel, *"The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to Me?...Stop bringing meaningless offerings!...I cannot bear your worthless assemblies...They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them."*

We remember also in Malachi 3 in reference to tithing God says...*"Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees & have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' 8"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes & offerings. 9You are under a curse - your whole nation - because you are robbing me. 10Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven & pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."*

Jesus said in Matthew 6:21...*"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* Our actions & reactions reveal where our hearts are before the Lord. And it's interesting that Jesus speaks about money more than any other subject.

God's people often were not living in faith, their hearts far from Him. Yes, they often observed the prescribed religious practices, but they were meaningless without trusting

the Lord in faith. That being revealed in a lack of generosity, care of others, justice, mercy & an obvious disregard for their calling to be a light to the nations for the sake of God's message to others.

The result in Isaiah 1 was that God had said, *"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening."* That would be hard to hear...

There's something to learn here, or more strongly said, to heed. Something to which we must pay close attention. What are the prescribed practices of church-life today? Do we practice them without trusting in faith the One we claim to worship & acting on our calling? If so, what effect does that have on our prayer life when we ask Him to intervene in the lives of people now? I couldn't imagine if Jesus walked into this service & said similarly to me! We pray on Thursday nights, and are starting a prayer walk soon. Is God listening, or are our prayers inhibited by our lack of faith? Our indifference to His calling in all other areas of life?

God will not be used - this is not about losing salvation, this is about relationship. V6 of Malachi 3 began with, *"I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed."* So, although they acted in such egregious ways God is true to His word. He said He'll save, and does, but the relationship extends beyond salvation into how we choose to live in obedient faith to His will & calling. We can't accept the gift of grace in Christ, yet treat it with contempt. Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship - never a truer statement. So, what's the Gospel message? Sometimes we need a simple reminder.

Firstly, Romans 3:23 tells us, *"For all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God."* Have you ever hated someone in your heart, looked at someone lustfully, lied (even a small one), etc... These are all in the category of sin which separate us from a holy God. We only need look at the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20 to know that we've all fallen short of the glory of God, and all sin has the same result...

Which brings us to the second point. Romans 6:23 tells us, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Thirdly, Romans 5:8 tells us, *"But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* This works because Christ was the only human perfect in holiness. One without sin, able to make the prescribed sacrifice of death to benefit anyone who would accept Him as Savior & Lord.

Fourthly, Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works (good deeds or even religiosity), so that no one may boast."* This reiterates the first point, that we can't live a good enough life - only Jesus did, and His work on our behalf is a gift.

And fifthly, Romans 10:9-10 tells us, *"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for*

with the heart a person believes, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”

Faith & salvation are a free gift, a work of God in us. In Christ, we're given what we do not deserve (eternal life), in order not to be given what we do (death), which transforms a person's heart, births gratitude & redefines purpose & direction for life.

As 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 states...“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ & gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The result of the Gospel of Christ in us is that we're renewed, reborn & given the ministry of reconciliation. As Ephesians 2:10 says, “*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” That ministry of reconciliation is the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus said...“*All authority in heaven & on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹Therefore go & make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*”

It's true that in any given problem, the simplest answer is usually the correct one. Applying that here, we see we're saved by grace through faith, not a work of religious observance, but simply the acceptance of Christ & relationship with Him. Reconciliation of relationship between God & Man. In that relationship, gratitude's birthed & we're given purpose in a ministry of reconciliation!

Take stock of your life, how much of who you are is given to His ministry? With how many have you shared the Gospel? How many people have you prayed over for emotional or physical healing? To how many widows, orphans, or prisoners have you ministered? How many disciples have you made? Do you tithe extravagantly in response to the knowledge that all you have belongs to God? Is your life about building your own kingdom, or His? Where is your treasure, what do you most desire, since that's where your heart truly is...

Which all brings us to Matthew 17:14-20. In this story Jesus exorcises a demon from a young boy. One which the Disciples were unable to drive out. As a result, Jesus reprimands them for their failure to trust the One to whom they ought to be praying, but didn't. It would seem they may act in religious ways, but their faith was not placed rightly in prayer - theirs was a reliance of self. But prayer in relationship with Jesus demonstrates a relationship of practical trust in His power to accomplish more than we might ever imagine.

In reading this story we realize, if the faith of the Roman Centurion was praised by Jesus, then the disciples lack of it isn't. It says...*When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus & knelt before Him. ¹⁵"Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures & is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."*

The disciples are impotent in faith having a form of godliness with no power. Jesus responds very differently with them than with the Roman Centurion. It continues...*¹⁷"You unbelieving & 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." ¹⁸Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.*

Jesus who's able to feed multitudes with a few fish & loaves...twice, calm the stormy seas, walk on water & raise the dead, says the word & the boy's freed! How many times do these guys have to see these things to be strengthened in faith? Even in the Great Commission as He stood before them resurrected & giving them their marching orders for the rest of time, it says 'but some doubted.'

Can there be anything more tiring to the Lord of all creation? If you have older children, you know it is...kids who deny their abilities, won't take necessary risks, get paralyzed by fear & anxiety, constantly questioning their worth in certain situations - how many times do we have to say, "No! You CAN do it! You have something to give!" How tiring is it for Christian leaders to constantly have to say to others, "You can be free! You can do ministry, you can pray over that person, and share Christ with them!" No wonder Jesus was so impressed with the Roman Centurion who said, "*Lord...just say the word, and my servant will be healed.*"

It continues...*¹⁹Then the disciples came to Jesus in private & asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰He 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."*

Apparently they had less faith than a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds. If I were holding it in my hand you could not see it from there - it's a dot, think about the size of that seed which Jesus says is necessary faith to see powerful things happen in light of all of creation surrounding it - it's almost nothing!

Again, Jesus demonstrates His power in this act of exorcism placing emphasis on the inability of His disciples to accomplish the same decisive healing. In fact, the inability of the disciples to cure the boy's seizures is repeated three times - by the father, by the disciples & by Jesus. To discover the reason for their failure, it's necessary to look outside Matthew to Mark's description of the same episode. There it says, "*And He [Jesus] said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer"*" (Mark 9:29). It seems the disciples failed to pray, failed to take advantage of God's power to heal the boy.

One thing God has impressed upon me as of late is that in all situations I am near, if not fully powerless. I can't rely on my wit, intelligence, or skill - people are knots too complicated to untie with my limited ability & rhetoric. My greatest & only real tool is faithful prayer. Calling on the God of the universe, Jesus, who feeds thousands with very little, walks on water, raises the dead, overcomes the grave, and heals & frees people from sickness & possession!

This exorcism follows immediately on the description of Jesus's transfiguration. A spectacular demonstration of Jesus's authority over nature where *"His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light."* Moses & Elijah appear next to Him, speaking with Him (Matthew 17:1-3). *God the Father speaks to all present, as He did at Jesus's baptism... "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him"* (17:5). Could there be any more impressive display of divine authority? Jesus has left all but Peter, James & John at the base of the mountain, and it's these men who return to find *"the misery of the human condition,"* in this little story¹ The juxtaposition of these two episodes can't be coincidence, and serves to remind us of our utter reliance upon God, in prayer, for all things.

Jesus's frustration is palpable... *"You unbelieving & perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"* (Mt 17:17). Who's He reprimanding, the father, the disciples, Israel, all humankind, or even the Church? One commentator says, *"The Church of any time, which cannot or will not be open to God's doing miracles, is the object of Jesus' bitter denunciation."*² Jesus said, the gates of hell won't prevail against the Church (Mt 16:18), but the Church does plenty of harm to itself when its own members struggle to act & keep faith in Jesus.

The disciples fail to pray...a problem which hasn't disappeared. *Christian Wiman writes, "It's a strange thing, how sometimes merely to talk honestly of God, even if it is only to articulate our feelings of inadequacy & confusion, can bring peace to our spirits. You thought you were unhappy because this or that's off in your relationship, this or that was wrong in your job, but the reality is that your sadness stemmed from your aversion to, your stalwart avoidance, of God...You cannot work on the structure of your life if the ground of your being is unsure."*³ Nothing can be built on a faulty foundation!

Building a strong foundation begins simply with the Gospel - coming to Christ as outlined in the beginning of this sermon: our justification. And continues in transformation into the life of Christ: our sanctification. Opportunities abound, but stagnation occurs when we do not grasp hold of them.

¹ (Eugene Boring, The Gospel of Matthew, The New Interpreter's Bible 8 [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 367)

² (Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary, vol. 2, The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 189)

³ (Christian Wiman, "Hive of Nerves," American Scholar, June 1, 2010, <https://theamericanscholar.org/hive-of-nerves/#.Xg15BRdKhME>)

Church life is important for you, but you're also important to church life! It's where you are ministered to, but where you also have ministry to do. Practice in here, sharpens you for out there. Come early, stay late, get all you can. Stop being critical of little things. Harping & focusing on little things is your willing openness to spiritual attack - you allow it - stop. Get to Community Group. When we do Alpha, invite people & come. Join us for prayer on Thursday nights via Zoom, or for the prayer walks we begin next month. Come to prayer trainings & learn how to pray for others. If you need prayer, come up to the prayer room after the sermon for it - we all need it! We need to stop being so private, becoming confessional, live in risk, reach out, do something - activate faith! To stretch ourselves in ministry, making Christ's calling central to all we are & do, and life will not ever be boring.

The disciples failed to pray, but we need not do the same. Engaged in diligent attention to our grounding in the Gospel, we'll find that our own power to trust & thrive will grow as we cultivate a relationship with Jesus.

In a 2017 column for *The Guardian*, Giles Fraser describes an incident in his inner-city parish. The church warden arrived to find the lock of a side door broken & a man inside, having lit every candle in the sanctuary in prayer. He writes, "Later that evening, as the weekly congregation gathered at our evening prayer time, we agreed that there was much to admire in a man who had gone to such remarkable lengths simply to get into a church to pray."⁴ They could've been scared, called the police, overreacted, but instead they reacted in risky faith & were better for it. Both that man & the congregation demonstrated the kind of faith & trust Jesus commends.

In a moving written testimonial, Dr. Kathryn L. Butler describes the series of experiences which brought her back to God. Dr. Butler had been serving as a trauma & critical care surgeon in Boston. In the span of a few hours in a single shift, her patients had included a twenty-two-year-old man beaten to death, and two unrelated shooting deaths of fifteen-year-old boys. Raised in a culturally Christian home, she had no faith to support her, and she felt no need to worship a God who would allow such suffering, at least until she met the family of a man named Ron, lying in a vegetative state after an episode of cardiac arrest. Their faith in God & their continued prayer resulted, Dr. Butler writes, in nothing short of a miracle when their father awoke. "The Lord took my despair & fashioned a canvas for His perfect work. Just as Christ raised Lazarus so that others might believe, so He redeems suffering - the gunshot wounds, the mourning, the lost jobs, the despondency beside bridge railings - for His glory."⁵ The power of God in Jesus Christ to move mountains - and restore life - cannot ever be underestimated.

17th-century poet Thomas Traherne said, "Be present with your want of a Deity, and you shall be present with the Deity." We may say, 'Be present with your want of Jesus, and

⁴ (Giles Fraser, "A Man Recently Broke into My Church. Good on Him, I Say," *The Guardian*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2017/jan/05/a-man-recently-broke-into-my-church-good-on-him-i-say>)

⁵ (Kathryn L. Butler, "A Critical Care Surgeon Meets the Great Physician," *Christianity Today*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/march/critical-care-surgeon-meets-great-physician.html>)

you shall be present with Jesus.' We do nothing without desire. Cultivate a desire for Jesus, be present with Him. What's your greatest desire? Is it to know Jesus & have others do the same? Or is it something less magnificent, like your children, your spouse, job, retirement, traveling, or even some do-good ministry project...whatever it is, it pales in comparison to knowing Jesus & making Him known! If you desire your spouse & children to live greatly, then pursue Jesus yourself, your relationship to Him overflows to them.

Is the existence we want to just chase after money, or even something so banal as a quiet good life? To only parcel out little moments of devotion here & there - a church service, a walk in the woods, a couple of hours of meditation a week - all the while maintaining the frenzy of our usual existence outside of those moments.⁶ To live in anxiety rather than freedom?

Jesus said in John 14:12, "*...whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.*" Life in relationship. Active & intentional. A life given over to Jesus is a life of prayer demonstrating a relationship of practical trust in His power to accomplish more than we might ever imagine. A life which doesn't count itself as center, but sees the greater calling in Christ to the ministry of reconciliation! A life of risky faith in pursuit of the divine purposes in which Jesus calls.

⁶ (Christian Wiman, "Hive of Nerves," American Scholar, June 1, 2010, <https://theamericanscholar.org/hive-of-nerves/#.Xg15BRdKhME>)