

Intro

When you look at the mission of the church, making new disciples and bringing them to maturity, what do you see today? Impossible obstacles? Alarming trends? Despair? Opportunity? A powerful, merciful God at work?

Is there any hope? Or simply despair? I'm asking us to consider where our focus is.

As a church we have several options. First, we can despair. It's too hard to be a witness for Christ so why bother. Second, we can ignore the mission. Forget what Jesus commanded the church to do and go our way, charting our own purpose in life. Third, we can confidently engage in mission. Engaging in gospel advance because we trust in a merciful and powerful God who is able, and does the impossible.

Let's look to Matthew 17:14-27 to learn from the disciples' failure and Jesus' instruction on mission.

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Point 1: Trust God to do the impossible – faith fuels mission (17:14-20)

FCF: lacking confidence in God's ability...eyes on our impossible circumstances not God

Arrival

Peter, James, John, and Jesus have come down from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. They meet up with the other disciples and the crowds (Mark 9:14). A desperate man pleads for Jesus' help.

Plea

We've seen this repeatedly in Matthew. A person faces an impossible, desperate situation. A loved one is going to die. An illness medicine can't heal. Demonic oppression causing a loved one to suffer. The crowds knew enough about Jesus to believe that he was able to do the impossible. The crowds knew enough about Jesus to believe that he was merciful.

The man makes his request: *"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."* ¹⁶ *And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him"* (17:15-16).

This man approaches Jesus from the posture of need (Lord, kneeling). Like a child asking a parent for permission to go to a friend's house. Or an employee asking their boss for permission to go on vacation. And a posture of desperation (*"have mercy on my son"*). Like a person with back pain seeking the doctor's help to eliminate the torturous suffering. The man's concerned about his son.

Suffering

His son “*suffers terribly*” = his suffering is severe. On a scale of 1-10, the son’s suffering is a 9 or 10. Mark adds some details:

“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.” – Mark 9:17-18

In Matthew, demons are often, but not always, the cause of physical suffering. Imagine the father seeing his son tormented in this way and powerless to do anything about it!

Matthew adds:

“For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water.” – 17:15

It’s not just grief over seeing his son suffer. There’s fear of death. What if the child is burned too badly? What if he drowns? One can only imagine how this hampered the family. Surely a son in this condition had to be watched at all times. Inconveniences abounded. The family couldn’t function normally. Fears abounded. What will happen to my son next? The demon inflicted the boy and the family. This had been going on “from childhood” (Mark 9:21) = ongoing, unrelenting trial.

Failure

“And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” – 17:16

The father had previously sought the disciples’ help, but they failed. These were the nine left behind. This was a problem because Jesus had given them ability to cast out demons. In Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus sent the 12 out to proclaim “*the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” And he commanded them, “*Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.*” They should’ve been successful.

Exasperation

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.” – 17:17

Faithless = the general unbelief in Israel in Jesus’ day. Both the crowds and the religious establishment. Twisted = Israel has departed from true adherence to God’s law. Is Jesus addressing his disciples, the crowd, or both? Answer: the crowd. Elsewhere in Matthew when Jesus rebukes the present generation he is addressing unbelief, not his disciples (11:16; 12:29-42, 45; 16:4). Jesus is engaged in conversation with the man, not the disciples. And Jesus rebukes his disciples in a different way: he accuses them of having “little faith.”

Action

And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. – 17:18

Jesus is merciful and able. The boy is immediately healed.

Disciples’ question

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” – 17:19

The disciples are confused by their inability.

Jesus’ response

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." – 17:20

Because your faith is little. Note they had faith. But their faith inadequate to cast out the demon. Previously Peter's faith was little because he doubted when he attempted to walk on the water (14:30-31). His eyes were on the wind, so his faith waned. And the disciples were charged with little faith when they were worried about the fact that they had forgotten to bring the bread (16:6-8). They were consumed with worry and forgot about Jesus' ability.

Verse 20 explains how faith should function. We don't need to muster up some immense level of faith. All we need is faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, a tiny seed. Tiny faith (mustard seed) can have huge impact (move mountains). Our faith is little when our eyes are on our daunting circumstances instead of our powerful and merciful God. When our eyes are on Jesus, our faith, even though small, will have huge effects.

Likely the disciples failed because they focused on the severity of the demon possession. This demon is too powerful! They forgot about Jesus' power. That's why their faith was little. I've used what Matthew says elsewhere about little faith to understand this episode.

Application: textual criticism

- 1) If you have an ESV, you'll note 17:21 is missing and there's a note that says:

Some manuscripts insert verse 21: *But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting*

- 2) The NASB has 17:21 in brackets with a note that says:

Early mss do not contain this v

- 3) The NIV doesn't include 17:21 and has a note that says:

Some manuscripts *you*. ²¹*But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.*

- 4) The KJV and NKJV include 17:21.

What's going on here?

- 1) 17:21 isn't found in a good number of manuscripts, including two significant manuscripts that have been scrutinized for accuracy (these two are dated earlier than the copies with the verse)
- 2) Scholars need to explain why this verse isn't in these manuscripts
- 3) Scholars prefer the shorter reading because the scribes tended to add words instead of removing words
- 4) Scribes tended to harmonize gospel accounts
- 5) This is what's going on here: 17:21 was added to Matthew by the scribes to agree with Mark 9:29
- 6) Scholarship is virtually unanimous that 17:21 wasn't originally in Matthew

Be confident in the manuscripts

- 1) The Bible has significantly more manuscript evidence than books written in its time period (both in number of copies and closeness of the copies to the original document)
- 2) The differences are minor and affect no significant doctrines (this issue is a non-issue because the removed verse is present in Mark)

- 3) Scholars have devoted their lives to textual criticism to ensure your Bibles are accurate to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts
- 4) The ESV/NASB/NIV differ with KJV/NKJV on which manuscripts have priority, but again the variation in our copies is relatively minor like this case
- 5) We're not talking about conspiracies to keep out important parts of the Bible!

Application: mission

This was their mission as a community of believers. These disciples previously cast out demons (Luke 10:17-20) because Jesus had given them ability, but they couldn't heal the boy in this case. They saw impossible obstacles, not Jesus' ability to do the impossible. While still having faith, our faith can increase or decrease.

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." – 17:20

Moving a mountain through faith is a metaphor. Jesus isn't suggesting that Palermo Christian Church should start praying for Mount Katahdin to move. Like that's our mission as a local church. In context, if the disciples had a small measure of faith they would have been successful in casting the demon out. Moving the mountain illustrates great things accomplished (demons cast out) through a small measure of faith.

Likewise, if Palermo Christian Church has even a small measure of faith great results will take place here. Yes we're restricted by God's sovereignty. We can't manipulate circumstances to force results. We can share the gospel well and see minimal results. Yes God gives growth in terms of conversions as he sees fit. But if we're faithful, fruit will emerge. Whether it's new converts or healthy marriages or edifying friendships or children growing in wisdom and knowledge of the truth or joyful peace in the mist of horrific trials or favor with non-Christians, confidently acting in obedience will produce results.

These won't happen without faith. We can be pessimistic like the disciples. Maine is a frozen, hardened place. No one will give the gospel a hearing. We can't compete with a changing culture that is pushing the Christian worldview to the margins. No one will listen to what I have to say. The young people have left this church so we'll never reach young families.

Or we can live in faith, trusting God to do the impossible. Engaging our family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances because we believe the gospel is powerful to convert sinners. Engaging our community because we believe the gospel has something to say to people today. Faith that the gospel is good news. Faith that people can be won to Christ through our lives, our message, our prayers. Faith that God works through the means he commands of us.

Palermo Christian Church faces an impossible task. But we have a God who does the impossible.

We're talking about confidence in God that drives action today. Faith that God is at work in our church today. Keep spending time with that neighbor. Keep praying for that unsaved child. Act because you trust God is able to do the impossible! Faith fuels mission.

Point 2: Sacrifice your rights for gospel influence – wisdom fuels mission (17:22-27)

FCF: refusal to give up our rights for gospel influence

17:22-23

In 17:22-23, Jesus continues to prepare his disciples for his crucifixion and resurrection. They're deeply distressed = they're understanding is increasing.

The two-drachma tax

In Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax approached Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" – 17:24

Two drachmas was approximately two days wages. An annual tax given to support temple activities.

Jesus' question

Peter answers yes and Jesus seizes the opportunity to provide instruction. Jesus asks Peter, "*What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others (17:25)?*" Peter says, "*From others*" and agreeing Jesus concludes, "*Then the sons are free.*"

Obviously when kings tax their citizens they don't tax their children at the same time. A king's son is exempt from the king's tax. Likewise, God's children (Jesus and Peter) are exempt from paying the temple tax. Obligations to God (the temple tax) don't have to be paid by God's children.

Jesus' wisdom

"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." – 17:27

Even though God doesn't require them to pay they should. Because failure to pay the tax may offend unbelieving Jews they wish to reach with the gospel.

If they didn't pay the tax what would communicate to their fellow Jews? We want to receive temple services without paying our part. We don't care about the temple. We don't care about worshipping God. We reject God the Father. However they would be received, Jesus' disciples would lose favor by not paying the temple tax. So for the sake of mission they needed to pay the tax.

Living like a missionary

This is how missionaries behave. They are careful to prevent unnecessary offense. They know their message and contrary values are offensive enough that they don't need to create further barriers to the gospel.

A missionary talks and dresses and eats like their culture. They don't need to. They could continue using American lingo or dressing like Americans or insist on only eating American dishes, but they'd quickly wear out their welcome.

In a scene in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, Indiana and his companions are invited to Pankot Palace for dinner. The menu included:

- Soup containing sheep eyeballs.
- Live baby eels stuffed inside a moist boa constrictor.
- Chilled monkey brain served within the open head of the monkey, face and all.

Indiana's companion Willie is disgusted and refuses to eat. Indiana encourages her to eat despite her disgust. Why? In order not to offend their hosts.

The lesson is clear: for the sake of gospel mission be willing to give up your rights in order to have favor with those you're attempting to reach. It's as simple as respecting the wishes of a local store owner when you think the rules are ridiculous. Or responding kindly when your service at a restaurant wasn't exceptional. The question is, am I creating unnecessary roadblocks to the gospel? Wisdom fuels mission.

Non-Christians

- The God who created the world from nothing is caring, merciful, compassionate
- The God who created the world is able to do the impossible
- The God who created the world sympathizes with your suffering
- The God who created the world brings hope and relief to the despairing
- Jesus, God the Son, suffered for our sins, our rebellion to earn our forgiveness
- Jesus, God the Son, rose from the dead, revealing his power over death
- Turn from your sin and autonomy and trust Jesus... for forgiveness and for help to do his will today

Conclusion

Trust God to do the impossible – faith fuels mission. Place your confidence in God's mercy and ability. Beware of pessimism.

Sacrifice your rights for gospel influence – wisdom fuels mission. Live like a missionary. Seek influence with non-Christians.