

No One Like Jesus: What Can We Do?
By Jason Huff
November 20, 2016
Proverbs 15:29; Psalm 66:16-20; Matthew 17:14-21

Our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 17:14-21. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." "O 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." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, 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. But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." "

I grew up loving Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*. I delivered newspapers, so along the way I read the paper, and I always made time for *Peanuts*. Everyone knows Charlie Brown. There's never been a more good-hearted character more prone to failure than Charlie Brown. He never kicks the football. He never has a winning baseball season. He's lucky to get straight Cs on his report card.

What's funny is that we never know how the other kids in the *Peanuts* gang do in school. Most of them are on the same losing teams as Charlie. But Charlie Brown is the brunt of all the jokes, the one who can't seem to do anything right. It's his fault they lose; it's his fault they have a bum Christmas tree. Yet we love him because he *is* us. He's one of the most relatable characters in literature. But the best thing about Charlie is that he never gives up. He always tries to kick the football one more time. He always knows there is another season.

This week's passage made me think of Charlie Brown because the disciples are at their Charlie Browniest. They have failed, and big time. They're stunned at their inability and don't know the right questions to even ask why. Yet in the midst of a dark time for the disciples, Jesus encourages them about what they *can* do if they just hold tight to Him. Just like our pal Charlie Brown, the disciples have blown it, yet there's still a next time. In Christ, our setbacks are teachable moments if we are ready to learn.

If you remember last week's passage, Jesus has just been on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John. They had the incredible experience of seeing Jesus transfigured, shining with the glory that He had before the world was created. They've encountered Moses and Elijah and they've heard the voice of the Father speaking to them. This is an amazing moment of revelation for the three disciples. But their return from the mountain doesn't bode well. They come down to find the rest of their group struggling. A man's son is possessed, and the other apostles don't have a clue what to do about it. They're gone just a little while, and it seems that the other disciples have forgotten everything Jesus has taught them.

Unfortunately, history repeats itself. This looks an awful lot like what happened when Moses went up the mountain to be instructed by God. He came back down with the Ten Commandments in hand only to find the entire Hebrew nation partying around a golden calf. They too wandered from their faith when their leader was away. But this time, it's the disciples who have failed, who very recently had been doing miracles in Jesus' name. It's a huge fall.

Jesus quickly takes care of the situation, but He gives everyone a warning – He is not going to be with them in the flesh forever to save them from their lack of faith. Jesus' death is coming ever closer. The disciples need to step it up! The healing itself gets very little time in Matthew – this kind of miracle is common to us now. The real issue is why the disciples failed to grasp why they were unsuccessful in rescuing this young man from the powers of darkness.

The first concept I want to explore from this passage is this: *self-reliance and forgetfulness about God's promises are faith killers*. This isn't spelled out in the passage, but it's a theme in Matthew. The disciples have been given so much authority, and they keep forgetting! Seven chapters ago, Jesus sent the disciples out to the people of Israel. They had the authority to heal, to cast out demons, to preach, all in Jesus' name. But here we go again...the disciples come up against a real villain in this exorcism, and they don't know what to do.

This has been their pattern. Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000, and the next time He wants to do it, they're like, "Sorry, we don't have enough to feed everybody." Jesus walks on water and Peter joins Him, only to falter when he takes his eyes off Jesus. They don't understand the parables about God's Kingdom because they're still focused on this world. They're so excited to be the Messiah's right hand men, they forget that the Messiah is God's own Son, and they must turn to God at every opportunity. As soon as they try to take matters in their own hands, as soon as they rely on their own strength, as they did with this young man, they find they have nothing.

Last week, I had an interesting conversation with our youth in our confirmation class. We discussed five main elements of the Lord's Prayer and what we're asking of God. Everyone agreed that they should pray more than they actually do. One of the key reasons we realized we don't pray that often is because we don't see the need. We aren't necessarily self-reliant, but we fail to see God's hand in everything.

We don't see a reason to ask God for our daily bread if our parents make sure we're never hungry. We don't recognize the temptations and evils around us, so we don't ask for deliverance. Our teens realized they are distracted by things that don't satisfy – we're just surrounded by our distractions so thoroughly that it's easy to hop from one distraction to another without realizing our need for God. As adults, we do it too. We become self-reliant...and then when something truly shattering happens, we don't know what to do or where to turn.

Thanksgiving is coming up on Thursday, and that's great for us. It's not really great if we just argue with relatives and watch the parade and stuff ourselves. But it can be great if we thank God for what we have and what He has done. Thanksgiving, if we do it right, settles our hearts and minds back on God. We recognize that all the good things we have are by God's grace. It reminds us that no matter our situation, we have things to be truly grateful about. And it revitalizes and rejuvenates our faith as we turn to God rather than to rely on ourselves.

That's the second thought I want to explore today: *faith is the mountain mover*. Jesus' analogy is powerful. Have the tiniest little bit of faith and nothing will be impossible for you. Mountains will move at your command. We'll deal with how we can grow faith in a minute. But for the moment, let's rest in this thought: by faith, anything is possible.

The Bible has a ton to say about faith as the mountain mover. Romans 1:17 tells us that the righteousness of God comes by faith, the righteousness by faith promised in Habakkuk 2:4. The promises God made to Abraham come to us by faith (Romans 4:16). Through Jesus, we now have gained access to grace by faith (Romans 5:2). We stand firm by faith (2 Corinthians 1:24). We are justified before God by faith in Jesus (Galatians 2:16). Our good works for God are produced by faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Hebrews 11 uses the phrase "by faith" over and over again to show the mountains that moved through the faith of God's people. By faith, Abel made a better offering than Cain. By faith, Enoch did not die but God took him to be with himself. By faith, Noah built the ark. By faith, Abraham obeyed and moved a thousand miles from home to the land that would become Israel. By faith, Jacob spoke about the future: the four hundred years of his descendants being slaves in Egypt whom God would eventually rescue. By faith, Moses' parents hid him from the king's edict.

By faith, Moses led God's people. By faith, the people crossed through the Red Sea to freedom. By faith, God's people "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." That's what faith does.

We might think, "The disciples had faith. And so do we. What's the problem?" But there's a huge difference between the typical definition of faith and Jesus' definition. When someone in our culture says they have faith, it can mean all sorts of things. Usually it means that they believe God exists. If they have faith in Jesus, it means they believe He's real, not made up. They believe some facts about Jesus – He lived, He died, and (hopefully) that He rose again. They might even believe that He came to earth to save us from our sins. They've wrapped their heads around the facts and agree in their minds that those facts are true. The disciples are like that at this point; they've experienced enough miracles to know the truth.

But that's not faith in its deepest sense, and that's why we (and the disciples) are often people of little faith. Faith is so much more than agreeing with the truth. It's being so confident in that truth that it changes how we live. It's depending on that truth for everything. It's finding our reason for being in the God who is there even though we cannot see Him. When we live in that childlike reliance on God, amazing things happen. When we count on nothing but God, we find we need nothing but Him.

We sometimes ask, why is it that even faithful people in the Bible didn't get everything they asked for? Paul dealt with a vision problem that God didn't take away. The apostles were all martyred save for John. Faithful people deal with pain and suffering, even right here in our congregation, after lots of prayer. Is it the result of too little faith? Not necessarily. Jesus leaves that open as a possibility why things don't happen sometimes. But there are other reasons too.

When we are people full of faith, fully reliant on God and daily walking in Christ's steps, we recognize that God's will is more important than our own. We pray for God's mighty power to work in certain ways, but we pray even more that God's will would be done. Would we intentionally skip over a challenge that God intends to use to grow us in kindness? Would we remove ourselves from every suffering, even though suffering teaches us who our Savior was and gives us greater compassion towards others? Hopefully not.

The point is, mountains are moved through faith. Sometimes, we just have in sight the wrong mountains. When we grow in our faith and live in ways that reflect godliness, all sorts of incredible things will happen. They may not happen in the ways we want. But God will be doing His extraordinary work through our simple, powerful faith.

So if great faith is the mountain mover, how do we increase our faith? That's our final discussion point for today: *we practice the spiritual disciplines to increase our faith*. It always floors me that Jesus had to tell the disciples that prayer and fasting were the right response to getting rid of the foul creature that had oppressed this young man. It seems obvious to me that if they weren't successful just using Jesus' name, they would have turned to prayer immediately. But it wasn't obvious to them – and frankly, when things are going badly in our lives, it doesn't always occur to us either.

There is no way to get better at something without practice. Professional golfer Gary Player tells a story how several years ago, he was practicing in a bunker down in Texas when an almost stereotypical Texan came up to him with the big hat and a big roll of bills. He saw Gary hit the first one in. He said, "You got fifty bucks if you knock the next one in." He did...and then the bet continued, and he sunk three more. Pulling several bills from his roll, the man said, "Boy, I never seen anyone so lucky in my life." And Gary responded, "The more I practice, the luckier I get."

To become an athlete, you've got to hit the gym. To become an excellent student, you've got to hit the books. To become an excellent percussionist, you've got to hit the drums. You see where I'm going here! And relationships are tricky business; there's no way you can make them work without putting in the time. Quality time is nice, but it's no substitute for quantity.

In the same fashion, we have to put in the time to pursue God for us to grow faith in Him. The disciples had no way of knowing that they were dealing with a particularly nasty demon that wouldn't just respond at the name of Jesus being flung about. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that they weren't in the habit of turning to God in prayer for everything. They hadn't put in enough time with God to know that the solution to problems is always prayer before action. They didn't yet see that the faith to move a mountain comes from knowing the God who moves mountains.

And what's the fasting bit about? I think it's less about a rule and more about a relationship, being so close to God that we aren't always thinking about our own wants. Let me give you an example. I knew that I would really enjoy working with the two folks who interviewed me at Compassion Pregnancy Center because I thought our interview went maybe 45 minutes. It actually went over two hours! I don't know about how everything will go with every volunteer there, but I've never had that kind of experience before in an interview, where it felt like everyone just clicked. Time went by and I didn't even notice.

Can you think of a time that you've spent with God that you've enjoyed it so much, that you've been so lost in thought and contemplation of Him and prayer and Scripture reading that you didn't even realize you'd missed a meal? That's the kind of relationship that we long for. Where things are so good that the world seems to go away. That's not to say that fasting as a discipline isn't a good thing. When we deliberately take away something essential to us, it makes us recognize our dependence on God all the more. Either way, it is wonderful to be in a place with God where we find that He is all we need, that He is the One who sustains us. Not our food, not our sleep, but our God.

How do we practice becoming people of greater faith? Richard Foster, one of the teachers in our recent Bible study, suggests we grow in faith through spiritual disciplines: inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines. Inward disciplines are things like prayer, fasting, and study. Outward disciplines are things like simplicity and service. Corporate disciplines are things like worship and guidance. (I've put a few of those in your outline in the bulletin so you can remember them.) I recommend his book *Celebration of Discipline* to help steer you along. But we really don't need another book to tell us those things. Scripture shows them to us time and again.

We can take this all as discouragement or encouragement. It's your choice. You can look at the disciples' failure and say, "Woe is me! I could never have faith enough to drive away a demon or move a mountain. I barely have enough faith to get out of bed in the morning!" But that's not why we've talked about them today. The disciples failed, but just like Charlie Brown, they kept going; they kept walking alongside Jesus. Given time, given practice, given the Holy Spirit (which every believer here has), they got it. They changed the world.

So be encouraged! The spiritual disciplines are something you can practice every day, and a little more each day. Say to yourself, "I'm going to do it," and do it, and it will become easier. I've started back on a weight-loss program, and the first few days were really rough. The biggest thing was saying, "I'm going to do this." It took literally months to finally do what I said. But now that I am, I'm glad I'm back on that track. I fell off the wagon once, and I may do it again. But even if we stumble along Christ's path, we're still falling forward. We're still moving in His direction.

As we step away from Matthew for a while as we move into Advent, it's a time to reflect on God's goodness, to find our thankfulness. May we not rely on ourselves and find we come up short; may we not forget all of God's goodness. Instead, may we walk daily with Christ, spending time with Him, setting aside the world, and find that mountains are stepping aside as we walk past.