

# The Church's Faith

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[0:00] If you could open up to Matthew 17, that will greatly assist you as we look at this passage. I'm going to start with just a brief orientation of what we have here and how it kind of parses out, and then we'll jump into it.

So what we have in Matthew 17 this morning is two accounts of Jesus' ministry, and each involves a miracle and some teaching. And in both of them, the miracle is actually the background.

It's actually the setting on which the action happens. And the action is actually Jesus. That's the foreground. Jesus teaching the disciples something really important. So first of all, there's casting out the demon, healing of epilepsy, but the main point there is actually faith.

And then second is the coin in the mouth of the fish, but the main point is actually freedom. And right in between those accounts, maybe you noticed this, there's kind of like an exclamation mark, and that's the prediction of the coming cross.

So Jesus' mission to suffer and die and be raised is right there in between the two accounts. This is the second time he's predicted it, and they're going to continue like a drumbeat as we go on in Matthew.

[1:13] So these predictions are kind of like, they form like the baseline, and all of the other things that happen are like the melody that are built on it. All of the teaching and miracles to come in the following chapters are built around Jesus' journey to the cross.

And what this means for us in our discipleship, because the next chapters are going to be all about our discipleship, is it means that our discipleship is also built around that same drumbeat.

It's built around the call to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. Okay, that's your orientation. So let's look at the teaching in turn. The first thing is the church's faith.

The second, the church's freedom. So the church's faith. You may remember from last week what happened, and we pick up the story with Jesus and his three disciples returning from that mountain of transfiguration, and they come down the mountain and they find the crowd along with the rest of the nine disciples.

And as soon as Jesus walks up to that crowd, he's approached by a man. Verse 14, So this crowd has gathered.

[2:33] They're looking for Jesus. And in his absence, they've gotten second-rate help from these disciples who were completely unable to help. And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you?

How long am I to bear with you? What? That was my reaction the first time I read it. What? Why is Jesus so upset?

The strength is surprising. Very strong. Look at the description. Faithless. People without trust who believe the wrong things. Twisted.

People without integrity who behave wrongly. And finally, how long do I need to deal with this? And these are just people that Jesus is exasperated with. Now, it's very resonant of something that God actually says in the book of Numbers.

I don't know if you've heard this before. I'm just going to read it to you. This is what God says to his people in Numbers. How long will this people provoke me? How long will it be before they believe me?

[3:40] For all the signs which I have showed among them, how long shall I bear with this evil congregation? Okay. So, by now in Matthew, we're really used to Jesus passing really strong judgments, aren't we?

So, he says some really strong things to the crowds. He says some really strong things to the religious leaders in Matthew. But I think what's really difficult about this is that it's the disciples' little

faith that sets the spark here.

So, he's addressing a lot of people, but it's really the disciples' kind of inability that seems to make Jesus so frustrated. So, let's imagine the scene. Jesus has just descended from the mounts where he's shone with the glory of God.

He's been revealed as greater than the law and the prophets. He's God's son whom God loves, and he's the one that we're supposed to listen to. And then, just like Moses descended to find the people of Israel making a golden calf, Jesus descends to find his disciples and the crowd around them.

And they're, I mean, they're not exactly making a golden calf, but they're weak, and they're confused, and they're faithless, and they're twisted. And on top of that, it's his hand-picked, intentionally mentored followers.

[ 4 : 57 ] These guys have seen and done amazing things. And you remember, back in chapter 10, they were actually, they were themselves casting out demons and healing people at Jesus' command. And so, they've heard all his best sermons, and they've retweeted him, when appropriate.

And even they are powerless. They're clueless. And Jesus is not okay with it. Now, it's good for us to feel some discomfort around that idea.

When I first read this passage, I thought, whoa, Jesus, take it easy. These guys are doing their best. You didn't exactly leave them in an easy situation. And I don't really like the idea that Jesus would be frustrated with his disciples.

I like to think that me just doing my best is kind of all that Jesus expects, as shoddy as that might be at times. And so, in other words, I like to paper over all the ways that I've missed the mark.

And I imagine that Jesus just kind of papers it over as well. I remember once telling our kids, when you say things like that to us, you hurt mom and dad's feelings.

[ 6 : 09 ] And they looked at us like, you have feelings? What? No, no, no, no, no. You exist to feed me, and take cute pictures of me, and generally kind of promote me to the world.

And so often, with Jesus, we fall into that same narcissism. Jesus would never rebuke me. He knows that I was just super tired.

He knows that being a disciple is just, like, a super hard journey sometimes. And what we do is we excuse our own behavior, and we expect that Jesus excuses it as well.

But our self-excusals are not the same as forgiveness. Excusal is cheap, because we say, there wasn't really an offense. There were mitigating circumstances.

But forgiveness calls for repentance. And forgiveness is costly. It's bought with a price. And so right as we begin this little story, we're called to reckon with the reality of our own inability, our own failure, and the fact that we, like the disciples, have little faith.

[ 7 : 20 ] And we'll come back to the idea of little faith in a moment. Let's carry on. Jesus says to the man, bring him here to me, speaking of the boy. Jesus never turns down someone who comes asking for mercy.

And so both the demonic oppression is relieved, physical healing is given. It's just immediate. It's just, it's just, it's so, it seems so easy, right, when Jesus does it.

But the miracle isn't actually the main point, as amazing as it is. The main point is verse 19. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, why could we not cast it out?

And 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.

This is fantastic. It's hard to reckon with the diagnosis. Their little faith, their failure. But there's a cure here as well. And it's shown an amazing promise that Jesus gives to us.

[ 8 : 26 ] So first let's look at the diagnosis. Lord, what went wrong? Why were we unable? Well, you're a bunch of little faiths, Jesus says. What in the world does that mean?

So, this is actually one word in Greek. Jesus has just taken the word little, and the word faith, and he's kind of just crammed them together like this.

And it's actually really funny. It's like his favorite nickname for the disciples in Matthew. And so it's great because there's like, I think there's a little bit of, there's certainly a rebuke in it, and yet there's also this sense of like, you know, affection.

So, he just takes the word little and the word faith, he puts them together, and he, and this is actually the fifth time in the gospel of Matthew that he calls his disciples little faith. And so, for example, he said, the little faiths are people that are anxious about their daily bread and clothing, forgetting that God is going to provide for them. You remember that from the Sermon on the Mount.

[ 9 : 27 ] And he says, little faiths are the kind of people that panic when their boat's in a storm. They forget that God's going to protect them. And the little faiths, they're the kind of people that discuss that they forgot to bring bread, even when Jesus is about to feed 5,000 people.

And they forget God's abundance. And so, what this is talking about is how we take our eyes off of Jesus, off of his power, and his glory, and his plan, and we become captivated by other things, either our appetites, or our desires, or even our fears.

That's the diagnosis, and I think we can relate to it as disciples. But what's the cure? What's the promise? That's the question, right? Well, he says, if you have faith like a grain of a mustard seed, nothing is impossible.

I think there's at least three things in that line that are vastly encouraging. I think sometimes we read that line, and we think it's like a threat, that it's a threat about needing to have more faith or something.

But no, it's absolutely a promise. It's a promise to all of us who know our own little faith, and know our own failure. And the first part of this promise is this sense of possibility.

[ 10 : 47 ] So earlier on in Matthew, Jesus already told us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, and it starts small, and it grows into a tree that takes over your garden.

Now, it's interesting. Jesus doesn't say, you know, your faith is like a speck of dust, or your faith is like a splinter. He actually chooses a seed as the metaphor, and a seed is a metaphor of growth. Your faith is little. You may be anxious. You may be distracted, but God is faithful. Even a seed of faith, even a tiny little seed can grow into a tree. You know, Jesus knows his disciples are weak, but they're still his disciples, and they are going to grow by the power of God working in their lives. And that's the second thing, it's power. That's the second part of the promise. There's a really purposeful contrast here, isn't there? There's a tiny seed to a really big mountain being moved. And the point is not that faith is just really super powerful. It's not like, you know, you have a tiny ball of faith, and it's like a little ball of uranium, and it can make like a really big explosion.

[ 11 : 59 ] It's not talking about that. The point is, you bring a little, and God brings a lot. The disciple is weak. The disciple is little.

The unlikely choice. We've seen that all through Matthew so far. The disciples are always kind of confused and weak. And we find them, and they're in the midst of this faithless and twisted generation, and their only claim is a little bit of faith, not even enough faith to get anything done. But there's power at work here. It's the power of God, and it spans the gulf of our own inability, and our distractibility, and our anxiety, all those things that captivate our attention.

God's power spans that gulf, and Jesus is saying, don't worry, little faiths. The mountain-moving God has called you. And so just a tiny bit of trust is going to be enough.

Jesus, who's going to suffer and die and be raised, he's going to work in you. He's for you, right? We know this. The final thing is prayer. So, when our lack of faith, and when our failure is identified, this interesting thing happens.

[ 13 : 10 ] It actually drives us to God for help. That's what I experienced this week as I worked on this sermon. And so, if you felt your lack of faith, along with the disciples this morning, as we've looked at this, it means that God has moved in your heart by his spirit, and he's convicting and calling you, and he's saying, confess your need and come to me for help.

The two people in Matthew that are commended for faith, they both came to Jesus begging for help, believing that he had power where nobody else had power. And Jesus' diagnosis here in this passage drives us right into his promise.

He is the one who can help. He's the only one who can help. And we can come to him in prayer with our little faith. Well, I'll be in trouble if I don't say at least a little bit about the rest of the passage.

So, we're going to do a really hard gear shift here. A little bit of a lurch. Do we need a stretch break? No? We're okay. Okay. So, we're going to go to the next bit of teaching, and we'll do it a little more quickly.

Okay. So, we're going to talk about the church's freedom. So, there's this break in scene, right? The drumbeat sounds. Jesus is going to the cross. And then we come into this new section of Matthew. [14:32] And the section that we're going to be covering for the next couple of months is all about the church's life together. What does it look like for us as a community who follows Jesus? What does it look like for us to live that faith out together?

And here's some tax collectors have come around, and they're collecting the temple tax. So, you should know this is actually a voluntary tax.

This is not a Roman tax. It's a Jewish tax. And it was paid for the upkeep of worship in the temple. And there were a bunch of different stripes of Jews, as you know, in Jesus' day.

Some of them didn't pay it. Some of them did. But in general, paying this tax was a mark of commitment to God's worship. And so, these tax collectors come up to Peter, and they say, Is Jesus going to pay?

And he says, Yes. And Jesus takes it as a teachable moment. So, look there in verse 25. What do you think, Simon?

[15:38] From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others? And he said, From others. And Jesus said, Then the sons are free.

Okay. So, you've got a king. Who does he tax? His kids or his subjects? Even Peter gets it right. His subjects, right?

Obviously. The sons don't pay tax. And Jesus says, Okay, great. So, the sons are free. In other words, the sons are not on the hook for paying the tax. So, he's saying something like this.

You, my disciples, are children of the king. I, Jesus, am the true temple. And me, God, and people meet. And the old temple is fading away. It's surpassed by those who are in Jesus.

And so, as we've gotten this far, we think, Okay, great. So, the disciples are free. They're not going to pay the tax. Right? Well, wrong. And there's another twist.

[16:36] So, Jesus says, However, not to give offense to them. Go to the sea. Cast a hook. Take the first fish that comes up. And when you open its mouth, you'll find a shuckle. Take that and give it to them, for me and for yourself.

Okay. So, I'll just invite you to take the fish thing and the coin and just set that to the side for a minute. And look at the reason that Jesus gives that we should not pay this tax.

Not to give offense to them. That is, the tax collectors. Well, this is surprising because Jesus is certainly not afraid to offend people.

He's already offended us several times this morning with what he said, right? So, you know, the religious leaders are already plotting to kill him. They're whipped into a frenzy every time he opens his mouth.

So, what's the difference here? Why choose to pay and not confront? I think it has to do with Jesus' audience and aim.

[17:40] Okay. So, let's think about the audience for a second. The scribes and the Pharisees, these are the people in power. These are the religious leaders. They're entrenched in their opposition to Jesus. They're actually using their authority in those positions to harm God's people, to lead them away from Jesus, right?

Now, let's think about the tax collectors. Kind of just their minions or something, right? Just kind of, they're just guys that are walking around collecting a tax. You could say that they're small fish to fry. No? Okay. It's a little bit punny. Okay. So, imagine that I go outside, go to my car, and I just lose it at a meter maid, taking it in my car out there.

And so, I hold forth on a more just framework for parking regulations, and I propose new legislation that will reform the parking system to be more just, right?

I've targeted the wrong person with my complaint. So, I think the audience here matters. But there's also the aim. When Jesus offends, it's around the truth of his identity, the truth of his mission, what God has sent him to do.

[18:54] Jesus offends people to wake them up. His aim is to help people see who he is and why he has come. And so, you could imagine that in this situation, having a theological throwdown over this kind of voluntary tax, it's just, it's not going to help these tax collectors come to know and trust Jesus.

They're probably just going to walk away being like, what's that guy's problem? What is going on with these disciples? Next week, we'll hear about Jesus' care for the little ones.

How the weak and the young among us are actually an opportunity for love and service. And Jesus is going to give absolutely dire warnings about making the little ones stumble. And I think that here, the tax collectors are the little ones.

Jesus is saying, don't offend them over something as silly as a temple tax. God's going to provide a payment. As my kids like to say, it's just money.

But really, from God's extravagant abundance and provision, he can miraculously make money appear. And even in the mouth of a fish, even this thing is, it's quite weird.

[ 20 : 07 ] And yet, God is supporting their freedom. Because the sons are free. They're free.

But they're free, they're not free from something, they're free for something. They're free for the sake of love and service. They're free to make Jesus known as best they can. And when we can avoid offending people, we do.

The other day, I was out driving with a friend and we came up to a crosswalk and there's a pedestrian crossing in front of us very, very slowly, as they do. And I said, if a car is waiting to turn and you're in the crosswalk and the car is kind of edging into your space aggressively, do you know, do you ever like slow down?

Do you ever, does that provoke you to walk more slowly in front of the car? And he looked at me and said, no, because I'm not American. I was like, okay, I deserve that.

But it's not just Americans, is it? We as humans, we excel at taking and causing offense.

Sometimes there's this thing else that just wants to stick it to someone.

[ 21 : 28 ] And we can be quite tribal about our commitments and our associations and we'll work overtime to shrilly defend our rights and freedoms from the slightest infringement.

But Jesus asks us here to act differently than that. He asks us to rank our freedom beneath our love for another person.

So we're asked to exercise wisdom and care in our witness. That's extraordinary. There's quite a bit of discernment and care that goes into sorting something like this out, isn't there?

And we all face decisions and choices like this pretty much every day as disciples. What to say, what not to say. As we seek to live and share the gospel of Jesus, we will certainly confront and offend, but never for the sake of flaunting our freedom.

And we never do it to make someone feel small or despised. And what Jesus draws our attention to here is that even these temple tax collectors might have faith like a mustard seed.

[ 22 : 35 ] And we can gladly go out of our way not to trample on it. So, faith and freedom. Let's pray together as we close.

Lord, grow our faith. Let us see the extraordinary lengths that you go to to nurture the tiny mustard seed and grow it in our lives, grow our faith, drive us to you in prayer for help.

And Lord, we also pray that you would govern our freedom and give us a vision in our lives for what it means to sacrifice our own freedom for the love and well-being of another. We pray these things for your glory.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.