

# The Church's Faith

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good evening, everyone. Great to be with you. Aaron and Joel are right. The evening catechism class is a lot of fun, and I would love to see you there next week. Come and try it out.

Our text this evening is Matthew 17, verses 14 to 27. It's very helpful if you have your Bible open with me now. At first glance, yeah, let's face it, tonight's passage seems a bit random. The coin in the fish's mouth is definitely the strangest miracle in the entire New Testament.

I almost thought I sensed in Claire's reading of it at the end, is this the word of the Lord? But what ties these verses together is the theme of faith, the theme of faith. And there are many common misconceptions about Christian faith. Outside the church, people declare that faith is wishful thinking and irrational. It's a crutch for those who are too weak to make it on their own.

Faith is just a holy hoping for the best. And even inside the church, folks, they anxiously worry that maybe I don't have enough faith. And Christians worry about their inability to heal someone who's sick or their inability to be healed when they are sick. It must be because I have weak faith or a lack of faith. If only I had more faith, God would answer my prayer. How do I get more faith? Be more religious? More involved at church? Pray with more confidence? Study more? These misunderstandings of Christian faith are partly because of how we misread Matthew chapter 17 verses 19 to 20. So have a look with me now at those verses. We'll start here. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, why could we not cast the demon out? And he said to them, because of your little faith.

We read the translation little faith and assume that Jesus is critiquing the size of our faith. But little here is not about size. Little here is almost better translated a poverty of faith, a misdirection of faith. It's not the amount of faith that matters, but where that faith is located.

[ 2 : 3 7 ] Where it's located. Incidentally, this means that if you're a new Christian, or perhaps a young adult, young in age, I mean, perhaps you're even just still exploring Christianity. You haven't made up your mind whether you can trust Jesus or not. You haven't fallen behind. There's no grading system for faith. It's a gift from God. Ask for this gift and you will receive it. In fact, if you've been a Christian for a number of years, there is a great danger which Jesus is addressing here in chapter 17. He's confronting it. Because the disciples, well, they've been with Jesus for about three years now. They've been learning from him. And in chapter 16, they finally recognized through their leader, Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Imagine, I work for the Messiah. And now Jesus has gone up the mountain for the transfiguration. And there's nine guys left behind. And when Jesus is gone, people are coming to me now and saying, hey, can you heal my son? Can you heal my daughter? Their hearts begin to swell with pride and status, which leads to self-reliance. Their faith is turning inward and becoming faith in my own ability to do God's work. The danger, you see, is that as we mature in Christ and our competency increases, our dependence on God decreases. As our knowledge about God grows, our dependence on God can shrink.

You see, true Christian faith is never self-centered, always Christ-centered. The object of true Christian faith is always Jesus Christ and all his promises. The object of true Christian faith is always Jesus Christ and all his promises. When we do work on our own strength, even very good work, it will fail.

But when we're rooted in submissiveness to God, even then, a tiny grain of true faith is effective. So Jesus reminds us in verse 20, 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.

Christian faith is like a window. If you want sunshine to come into your living room, the size of your window will never matter. What matters is that the window is facing in the right direction. When we turn our faith towards Jesus Christ, the object of our faith, then his light begins to pour in and through us. And perhaps tonight you are longing to grow in your faith. How do I grow, you wonder? Read of Jesus Christ. Immerse yourself in the faith-expanding word of God.

Just as the Father spoke from heaven at Jesus' transfiguration and said, this is my beloved Son with whom I'm well pleased. Listen to him. Listen to him. Read prayerfully, though. Read humbly. Read hungrily. God delights to grow our faith.

[ 6 : 13 ] But Jesus isn't done with his disciples yet. He takes the initiative in verses 24 to 27 to teach his disciples another key lesson about faith using an enacted parable, what parents call a teachable moment.

There's a temple tax which all Jews must pay. And Jesus isn't there when Peter promises the tax collector that, yeah, yeah, yeah, of course, Jesus will pay.

Yeah, he's a good Jew. So we pick up midway through verse 25. Have a look. And when Jesus came into the house, pardon me, when Peter came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first.

He takes the preemptive position here. Saying, what do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?

From their sons or from others? And when he said, from others, Jesus said to him, then the sons are free. Jesus' point is, of course, a king's children don't have to pay taxes to their father.

[ 7 : 22 ] Of course not. But who are the sons here? The sons and daughters are the citizens of the messianic kingdom. We are those children if we belong to Jesus Christ.

Jesus and his disciples, therefore, enjoy a relationship with God that frees us from obligations represented here by the old covenant temple tax.

We're free from the old law, from the old religion. However, however, Jesus isn't finished yet. Verse 27. 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. Exact change. What a strange verse. Jesus gives new meaning to the term goldfish.

Good. You're still tracking with me? Let's carry on, shall we? What's going on here? The key phrase is, so as not to give offense. Or literally in the Greek, so as not to cause them to stumble.

[ 8 : 33 ] Jesus and his disciples, I said already, are under no obligation to pay the tax. However, for the sake of the gospel, so that neither the tax collector nor any good Jew who hears about Jesus not paying the tax would be offended by this secondary matter, and therefore see this as a grounds, as a reason for rejecting Jesus outright as Messiah.

For the sake of the gospel, so that that doesn't happen, Jesus gives instructions to Peter on how to pay the tax for both of them. And immediately there's an obvious application for us as Christians today.

Jesus calls us to wisely discern when to give offense and when to avoid giving offense. So just like Jesus, we must never be afraid to give offense whenever the centrality of Jesus' saving work on the cross is at stake.

However, when it's not, we must humbly turn the other cheek. Let's say, let's say that you don't think Christians should celebrate Halloween.

Many Christians don't. But you work at a shopping mall where hundreds of kids come to trick-or-treat every year. And your work colleagues, they all chip in to buy candy to give out to those children.

[10:00] Is this the time and the place to announce to your work colleagues that Halloween is an abomination and you refuse to chip in \$5 for candy? No, probably not.

Probably not. Because you will offend, I guarantee it. And this will become a stumbling block to the gospel for your workmates. They will remember that you're a Christian and that you're too cheap to chip in for Halloween candy.

In other words, Christian faith always has a missional purpose, a missional aim. So never fall into the trap, don't fall into the trap of thinking that faith is just something you do.

It's just part of the trap of thinking that faith is just something you do. It's not. It's just part of your interior life between you and God. It's not. Jesus wants you to know faith is God's gift that is always towards a missional end, towards a missional aim.

As well as growing with Christ, you will also be looking out to serve Christ. God's gift of a growing faith is always so that we may offer that same faith to others.

[11:17] That's what I'm trying to say. St. Paul writes, We suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. And Jesus said in Matthew's gospel a few chapters ago, Be wise as serpents, yet innocent as doves.

That's what we've been illustrating. Okay, so let me remind you what I've been saying. Remember that Jesus is teaching here about faith, and he's reminding us that what is most important is not the size of our faith, but the object of our faith.

And the object of true Christian faith is always Jesus Christ and all his promises. Now I describe verse 24 to 27 as an enacted parable, a teachable moment.

How is this the case? Let's dig a little deeper. In verse 27, Jesus is really saying to Peter here, Trust in me. Go fishing.

Go do the thing that you are most qualified and competent in the whole world to do, but trust me. Do exactly as I instruct you, and I promise I will provide everything you need.

[12:25] So why doesn't Matthew explicitly tell us that Peter went out and did exactly what Jesus said? Why is there no verse 28 in this chapter? Not because he didn't go and do it.

No. I think it's because he wants it to become a teachable moment for you and me. As if to say, What would you do if Jesus asked you the same question?

Here then is the heart of the gospel of faith as we close. What Jesus does in the fish miracle is to show Peter and you and I that his gospel does not come to collect tax from us, a debt from us, like other religions do.

But instead, this Jesus is the one who will wipe away every debt of sin that we owe by nailing it to the cross on his body. This Jesus is the one who will pour out his blood so that sons and daughters are free.

And sandwiched between these two strange stories we've explored together is Jesus' second announcement of his death and resurrection. Verses 22 to 23. The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him and he will be raised on the third day.

[ 13 : 55 ] This is the church's faith. This is the Jesus who we worship and we proclaim. Amen.