

Matthew 17C

- Jesus and Peter, James and John are coming down from the mountain following Jesus' glorification
 - They engaged in that interesting conversation about Elijah which Jesus quickly turned into a discussion about His own circumstances
 - They wanted Jesus to tell them why Elijah was supposed to return shortly before the end of this age
 - But Jesus wanted them to know that in the near future He was going to suffer and die to fulfill the purpose of the age
 - And as we studied that moment, I told you that the disciples' misplaced priorities can be a challenge for any Bible student
 - We have to maintain a balance in our study of the Scriptures
 - We can't let our interest in the future foretold in the Bible overshadow our present responsibilities of knowing and serving Jesus
 - We know we're living in the end times, so that's our best reason to focus now on our witness and our mission
 - In the case of the disciples, Jesus had precious little time with them before He would turn over the Church to their leadership
 - So as they contemplated the meaning of a prophet coming to a distant generation shortly before the end of the world...
 - Jesus reminded them to focus on Him instead and on the things Jesus was preparing to do in their life
- In a nutshell, that's what the Bible is talking about when it tells us to walk by faith
 - To walk by faith means to live every day in the present, knowing that God is at work in and through you to glorify Himself
 - Yes, His plan takes us to the end of the world and beyond, but it's happening even now everyday
 - We will acknowledge that our eternity is secure and Jesus wins in the end

- But are we also willing to acknowledge that He rules in our lives today?
- Do we think enough about how today contributes to God's plan?
- That's the question that drives us into the next section of the chapter
 - And the scene picks up immediately after Jesus and the three disciples return from the mountain

Matt. 17:14 When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying,

Matt. 17:15 "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water.

Matt. 17:16 "I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him."

- As the men come down, they approach a crowd of people, and a man in the crowd falls down before Jesus seeking healing for his son
 - Matthew actually drops us into the middle of this moment without much background, but Mark gives us more details

Mark 9:14 When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them.

Mark 9:15 Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him.

Mark 9:16 And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?"

Mark 9:17 And one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute;

Mark 9:18 and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it."

- Mark helps us understand the overall moment better and in particular the fact that the scribes were present
- Mark says the scribes were arguing with the crowd, and probably more specifically with the disciples of Jesus
- Jesus and the three disciples approach the arguing crowd, and as soon as the crowd sees Jesus they run over to Him

- The scribes don't accompany the crowd to see Jesus, so Jesus asks the crowd to explain what the debate had been about
- And one man in the crowd speaks up explaining that his son's predicament was at the cause of the commotion
- Both Matthew and Mark tells us that the boy has been demon-possessed from a young age
 - And the demon's presence in the boy has produced terrible physical consequences, Mark reports
 - He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, stiffens his body like a seizure, and most importantly, the boy has become mute
- Back in Matthew we hear that this demon would also compel the child to throw himself into fire or water, presumably in an attempt to kill the child
 - Demons are fallen angels, spirits that followed after Satan in his rebellion against God
 - These fallen angels are now bound to serving their master, and they exist to do his bidding
 - Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels that Satan's *modus operandi* is to kill, steal and destroy
 - And therefore, demons have the same mission as they act on Satan's behalf
 - And one of their tactics is to occupy human bodies (though they are not able to possess the body of believers)
 - In this way they seek to kill, steal and destroy:
 - They are destroying the boy's physical body slowly
 - And they are stealing away from the boy's father the joy of a healthy son
 - And they are seeking to kill the child
 - So as Jesus said, these demons have come to kill, steal and destroy, and in the process they hope to strike fear into the hearts of onlookers
 - But as you may remember from the last time we studied demon possession, a demon spirit cannot leave a physical body easily

- Once a demon takes up residence in a human body, they are bound to remain in that body for as long as the body is alive
- When a demon is ready to move to another host, they must find a way to bring about the death of their current host
 - They will torment the person's mind and body to accomplish that goal, speaking to the person to convince them to take their own life
 - Or as we saw in the story of the pigs that ran into the sea, they may drive the body to endanger itself as they are doing here
- The only other way a demon can be removed from a body is when God Himself casts or forces out a demon
 - And demons don't like to be forced out of their hosts by God, because it ruins the effect of their possession
 - Demons possess people to show their opposition to God and to defy God by destroying His greatest creation, human beings
 - And ultimately, they seek to provoke fear among God's people by demonstrating their power over the human body
 - So when they are cast out it ruins everything...it rescues and restores the person, it makes Satan's demons appear weak and it brings glory to God
 - That's why a demon, who had been seeking to escape the body by killing it, nonetheless will still resist efforts to cast it out
 - If a demon can resist efforts to expel it from a body, it brings that much more glory to its master, Satan
 - And ultimately, they undermine the faith of God's people in God's power and authority
 - That's the situation Jesus has dropped into, and now it's up to Jesus to fix the mess that His disciples invited
- In v.16 the man tells Jesus he brought his son to the disciples hoping that they could remove the demon
 - The father assumed that Jesus' disciples possessed the same ability to heal as Jesus Himself, and that was a reasonable assumption

- Exorcism was not uncommon in Jesus' day, since men were sometimes empowered by God to cast out demons
- And in an earlier time the Lord had given His disciples power to cast out demons and they had done so successfully
- So it wasn't unreasonable for the father to ask, but despite their best efforts, the disciples were unable to free the boy
 - And in Mark 9:14, we're left with the suggestion that the disciples' failure to cast out the demon triggered that argument with the scribes
 - And the argument comes from something that happened earlier, back in Chapter 12
- In Chapter 12 Jesus casts out a mute demon much like the one we see in this boy here
 - As I told you then, rabbis in Jesus' day recognized that the Messiah, when He came to Israel, would possess unique powers
 - And those unique powers would set Him apart so as to confirm His identity as Israel's Messiah
- One of those unique powers would be the ability to cast out a demon which has rendered its host unable to speak (mute)
 - From time to time, God gave men in Israel the authority to cast out demons but they had to use a specific method
 - That method required that the exorcist communicate directly with the demon inside the body to learn its name
 - The exorcist would attempt to speak to the demon inside the possessed person hoping the demon would answer back
 - If the demon shared its name by speaking through the person's mouth, then the exorcist could cast the demon out by name
 - We saw Jesus using this method in Luke 8:30 and Jewish exorcists using the method in Acts 19
 - This was the way the Lord directed Israel to remove demons, and it worked whenever the Lord willed it, to allow it
 - But if a demon rendered the person mute, then casting out the demon was not possible using the normal method

- So rabbis concluded correctly that only the Messiah would be able to compel a mute demon to leave a body
- Back in Chapter 12 when Jesus cast out a mute demon, the crowd immediately recognized the significance of that Messianic miracle
 - They even asked whether Jesus could be the Son of David but the leaders rejected that possibility
 - And ever since that moment these leaders have been seeking to undermine that claim
- And when Jesus' disciples failed to cast out this mute demon, they think they've found the opportunity they've been hoping for
 - The scribes begin to argue before the crowd that the disciples' failure was proof that Jesus was a fraud
 - Then Jesus shows up, and the crowd runs to His side, leaving the scribes to slink away for a future opportunity
- Obviously, the disciples made the mistake of presuming they could do whatever Jesus could do merely because of their association with Jesus
 - And this is a mistake that's easy for any believer to make, especially once the Lord has worked through us in amazing ways in the past
 - In earlier days when Jesus gave these men power to cast out demons, they performed amazing ministry
 - Listen to what a large group of Jesus' disciples said as they returned from using those new-found powers

Luke 10:17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."

- Those men were so excited to tell Jesus what they had accomplished, and that's only natural
- We feel the same way when Jesus gives us great results
- Have you ever prayed for someone specifically, and you see the Lord grant the very thing you requested?
 - Or you give money to a ministry need and then later you hear that the amount you gave was exactly what was needed?

- Or maybe you feel led to share a verse of Scripture with someone as an encouragement
 - And then that person looks at you wide-eyed and says that was the exact verse the Lord put on their mind earlier that day
- That's what it feels like to walk in the Spirit, that inner thrill we feel when we do what Jesus asked us to do and He shows up big time
 - It builds our faith, it encourages us and it whets our appetite for more opportunities like that
 - It's the joy of serving our Master
- But if we're not careful, our successes in ministry can become an opening for our pride, and if so, it impedes our future service to the Lord
 - That seems to have happened for these disciples
 - Because their success in that earlier moment led them to presume too much in this moment
 - And I believe Jesus knew this could happen, because of what He tells them immediately after they celebrate their victory

Luke 10:18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

- Jesus first offered them that encouraging word, saying as they cast out those demons, Jesus was watching Satan fall from heaven
 - He means that whenever we serve Jesus in the power He gives us, we're participating in the defeat of Satan's dominion
 - One spiritual victory at a time, one soul at a time, Jesus says our successes are bringing Satan down
- But the key here is it's not we who defeat Satan...it's Jesus working in and through us
 - We don't decide what work must be done...Jesus told them to cast out demons
 - And our success certainly isn't a result of our ability...Jesus gave them the power and authority to accomplish that work

- So we aren't working for Jesus...we're not even working with Jesus...we aren't even working at all – He does all the work through us
 - But it's easy to blur those lines especially after we get a taste of success in ministry
 - We can come to see ourselves or our methods or our education or our training or our anything else as the source of our success
 - But it's never those things...it's always the Lord working through us, which means He receives all the glory
 - And that's why Jesus tempers the disciples' excitement in the next part of that passage from Luke

[Luke 10:19](#) "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.

[Luke 10:20](#) "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

- Jesus says those men were given specific authority and power to accomplish certain things according to Jesus' direction
 - And yet He says do not rejoice in the power I give you to serve me
 - Because when we rejoice in that power, we are no longer rejoicing in Jesus and His work
 - We've begun to rejoice in our own efforts as if the power is our own
 - And we don't have to possess power to cast out demons or handle deadly serpents to be tempted into this thinking
 - Any success in ministry has the potential to deceive our hearts into thinking we're something special
 - And to that Jesus responds saying do not rejoice in your accomplishments
 - The disciples shouldn't rejoice that the demonic spirits were subject to them, and nor should we rejoice in whatever we accomplish
 - But what should we rejoice in: that are names are recorded in Heaven

- Or in other words, rejoice in the saving work of Jesus who made us to be a royal priesthood and called us to serve Him
- Put simply, rejoice in the work of Jesus for you, not your works for Him
- So back to our study, having heard that His disciples tried and failed to perform the miracle, Jesus rebukes the father of the boy and the rest of the crowd too

Matt. 17:17 And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me."

Matt. 17:18 And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once.

- Jesus reacts to the scene with disgust and frustration, calling this generation of Israel unbelieving and perverted
 - Harsh words, to be sure, and we need to understand why Jesus was so upset
 - First, He calls this generation unbelieving because of the prior moment in Chapter 12
- When Jesus cast out the mute demon previously, they recognized that Jesus had done something that only the Messiah could do
 - But the Pharisees explained it away as the work of Satan casting out his own demons
 - And despite the illogical nature of that explanation, the crowd accepted it and refused to embrace Jesus as Messiah
- Now here we find the same type of possession, yet this time the crowd has turned to Jesus' disciples expecting them to perform the same miracle
 - What does that tell us about their beliefs?
 - First, it tells us that they believed the Pharisees' explanation from Chapter 12...they believe that Satan had given Jesus His power
 - And therefore, they assumed that Satan may have also given the disciples the same power
 - Their willingness to ask the disciples to cast out a mute demon was proof that they were unbelieving in Jesus as Messiah

- Secondly, even though they were told that the power to cast out a mute demon came from Satan, nonetheless they still sought to gain Satan's help
 - They were willing to work with the devil to get what they wanted, and that's why Jesus called them a perverse generation
 - It's perverse to seek for the favor of the enemy of God, the one who comes to kill, steal and destroy
 - The devil's bargains always asks us to trade something of eternal glory for something of earthly perversion
 - And that's what this crowd had done, so Jesus expresses disgust in their unbelief and willingness to bargain with the devil
 - And He asks how long will I put up with you, how long will I be with you because time was running out
 - Jesus knew that He wasn't getting through to so many in that generation, and it spilled out at that moment
 - Moreover, Jesus is frustrated at His disciples for having opened this Pandora's Box
 - When they tried to perform this miracle, they participated unknowingly in the Pharisees' deception of the people
 - They have lent credibility to the suggestion that anyone could perform this Messianic miracle, which diminished Christ in their eyes
 - That's the impact of seeking to do ministry in our own power rather than in the power of Christ
 - Not only will we fail ultimately, because we're relying on our worthless efforts in place of Jesus' power and authority
 - But in the process, we tarnish Jesus' name and reputation, because we make Him appear to be impotent or uninterested
 - We introduce doubt into the minds of others who see our failures and assume that God is to blame
- And we see both of those results here, which is why Jesus reluctantly gets involved to heal the boy
 - In v.17 Jesus says bring him to me and in v.18 Jesus quickly does what only the Messiah could do

- He rebuked the demon and casts him out without knowing the demon's name
- And the boy was cured at once
- Jesus cures the boy to re-establish His testimony as Messiah and correct for the disciple's presumption
 - And that's what Jesus does...He protects His name and His glory
 - So if we act impetuously as these disciples did, you can expect Jesus to get the work done in His own way without us
- In the end He still gains the glory He deserves, but we may miss the opportunity to be a part of that work
 - We miss the experience of the thrill and joy of succeeding in a ministry that I mentioned earlier
 - In the end, Jesus always wins, but we may lose if we don't walk with Him in the Spirit
- But there's more to the story here, which we see in Mark's Gospel again

Mark 9:20 They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth.

Mark 9:21 And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood.

Mark 9:22 "It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"

Mark 9:23 And Jesus said to him, "'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes."

Mark 9:24 Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief."

- The father asks Jesus to help "if He can" and immediately Jesus seizes upon that statement because it reveals the man's lack of faith
 - Jesus responds saying, "If I can??" All things are possible to him who believes"
 - First, why is this man expressing doubt in Jesus' ability?

- Remember, the Jewish people had been taught that only the Messiah could exorcise a mute demon like his son's
- And yet Jesus had done this very miracle at least once before, so this man had every reason to believe Jesus was the Messiah
- And if so, he should have had complete confidence that this miracle could take place
- That's what Jesus meant when He says all things are possible for those who believe, as in believe in Jesus
 - If you believe in Jesus as Messiah, then you know He is God and therefore you know He can do anything
 - So when Jesus offers to do something for you, there's no room for doubt
 - You know Jesus can do it because He is the Creator of the Universe...as Jesus says elsewhere, with God all things are possible
- But it's important to understand that Jesus wasn't saying that we can do anything because we believe we can do it
 - That's not faith...that's heresy
 - If it were true that we can do anything we dream up merely because we know Jesus, then the disciples should have been able to cast out the demon themselves
 - We have zero power apart from Jesus, and therefore our faith in our power is meaningless and useless

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

- Now we see the devastating impact of the disciples' earlier mistake...they have brought doubt to this man's mind and confused him about what to believe
 - Notice his response to Jesus...in v.24 of Mark he says, "I do believe, help my unbelief"
 - Have you ever felt that way...part of you knows that you should trust Jesus in some situation
 - And yet another part of you still has doubt and fear and worry

- Where does that doubt and worry come from? We know Jesus is capable of all things, so why should we ever question?
 - In our case, our doubt is usually a result of not knowing for sure that what we want is what Jesus wants
 - In other words, we know Jesus *can* do anything, but we wonder *will* He do the thing we desire
 - And that's natural, and it gets easier as we grow in our relationship with Him and come to understand His will better
- But for this man the issue was not having full confidence in Jesus' identity
 - He believed in Jesus enough to bring his son seeking a cure that only the Messiah could perform
 - But at the same time, he was confused
 - Between the Pharisees' lies and the disciples' presumption, the man wasn't sure what to believe anymore
 - That's why he said he believed and yet he needed help to believe
 - And that's also why Jesus took pity on him and granted this miracle despite the man's wavering faith
- So Jesus has solved two of the three problems He faced: the son has been freed from the demon and the father's faith has been built up
 - But there's still the problem of the disciples' behavior...which is where we end today

[Matt. 17:19](#) Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not drive it out?"

[Matt. 17:20](#) And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.

[Matt. 17:21](#) ["But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."]

- Outside the hearing of the crowd, the disciples ask Jesus to explain what happened and why they couldn't cast out the demon
 - And the answer is because of the smallness of their faith

- Now how can faith be “large” or “small”? The key to interpreting Jesus’ words is to remember that faith requires an object
- Faith doesn’t exist by itself...faith without an object is merely wishing
- We place faith in something, and it’s that something that possesses the power
 - If I place faith in myself, then it’s my own power I’m relying upon
 - If I place faith in government, then it’s the power of government I depend upon to help me
 - And if I place faith in the Creator, then it’s His power I trust in
- So if I place my faith in something small, something of little power, than I have little faith
 - And if I place my faith in something large, meaning something of great power, than I have great faith
 - So Jesus wasn’t describing the amount of faith we have, and we see that plainly by what He says in v.20
- Jesus says you can have faith the size of a mustard seed and move mountains
 - You don’t have to have a strong faith, you just have to place what little faith you have in something strong
 - And that’s where the disciples went wrong
 - They placed their trust in themselves, which was a very small thing indeed
 - They thought they possessed the power to cast out that demon when they did not, for that was a Messianic Miracle
 - The Father had reserved that specific miracle for His Son to perform alone as a sign to prove His claim to be Messiah
 - And so no one else would ever be permitted to do the same
 - Notice in v.21 Jesus says this kind of demon only comes out with prayer and fasting, which refers to a petitioning of God
 - In other words, Jesus is saying that only God can accomplish this type of miracle of casting out a mute demon

- So you should have known to come to God, that is to Jesus, placing their faith in God's power
- Instead, they placed their trust in themselves, in their own power, and in the process they displayed little faith
 - And little faith accomplishes nothing because we've chosen the wrong object of our faith
- But Jesus says if they placed their faith in something great, like God, they could move a mountain, which was hyperbole to make a point
 - God can move mountains...God can do literally anything
 - So if you are walking in faith, knowing the will of God, then anything can happen
 - God could command you to move a mountain, and because you have faith in His power to accomplish that work, you could do it
 - If that happened, it wouldn't be you doing it self-evidently
 - It would be God doing it through you, and so your faith in God's power would have been rewarded
 - That's the key to understanding this whole passage
 - The crowd, the father and the disciples all struggled to place faith in the right object leading to failure and confusion and deception
 - The crowd placed their faith in Satan, and they were prevented by it
 - The father placed his faith in the disciples, and his faith in Jesus was weakened as a result
 - And the disciples placed faith in themselves, and as a result they diminished the name of Jesus among the people
 - Where we place our faith and trust matters more than simply who we call Lord
 - Our eternity rests on the answer to that question, yes
 - But what we depend upon for the power and authority to serve Jesus will determine the fruitfulness of our walk today
 - As Paul says,

[Phil. 2:12](#) So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;

[Phil. 2:13](#) for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.