

## Matthew 17:14-21 - “The Demon-Possessed Boy” – Feb. 25, 2024

1. Christ has just been on the Mount of Transfiguration
  - a. His divine glory shone through the veil of His humanity
  - b. Together with Him were Moses and Elijah
    - i. Representing the Law and the Prophets
    - ii. Both of these men had powerful experiences with God
    - iii. Both confronted the most powerful rulers of their day
    - iv. Both faced tremendous discouragement and went up the same mountain (Sinai/Horeb)
    - v. Both experienced the blinding power and glory of God on the mountain top, which meant both had to veil their faces
    - vi. Both of their lives ended in mysterious circumstances
      1. Elijah was simply assumed up to heaven
      2. Moses was taken up to a mountain, shown the Promised Land he wouldn't be able to enter, and then died and was buried by God Himself.
        - a. Later in Jude we read that the devil and the archangel Michael were contending for his body
  - c. And now both of these men, representing the Law and the Prophets suddenly appear together with Christ
  - d. Peter offers to make a booth for the three of them as though they are approximate equals

- i. As he is speaking, Moses and Elijah disappear behind a glory cloud and Christ stands alone
  - ii. This is a clear demonstration of the supremacy of Christ as the whole point of redemptive history
    - 1. The law and the prophets are not abolished, but they terminate into Christ as rivers reaching the ocean
  - iii. Christ stands alone as the champion of redemptive history
    - 1. He is the Prophet, Priest, and King that the ancients had been waiting for, and He is preparing to work through His final confrontation in Jerusalem on His way to His coronation in heaven, at the right hand of His Father
  - e. Yet all mountain top experiences must come to and end
  - f. Just as Moses had to come down from Sinai, Christ must come down from this mountain
  - g. Just as Moses was immediately confronted with sin, idolatry, and corruption when He came down to see the Israelites worshiping a golden calf, Christ comes down to see the effects of sin and demonic activity on a young boy and His disciples have been unsuccessful in undoing this corruption
2. VV. 14, 15 – *“And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, 15 said, “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.”*

- a. This father is like most other fathers who love their sons and want the best for them
- b. To see your boy suffering from seizures and epilepsy in such a destructive manner must no doubt be painful and heartbreaking
- c. Our modern English translations generally call this condition “epilepsy” or “seizures” but a more literal translation would be that he was “moonstruck”
- d. One area in which the ancients understood the world better than we do is that they were not content to treat science as the final word
  - i. No doubt they used whatever relatively crude science they had to come up with technology and with remedies
  - ii. But they understood there was an unseen world that was just as real as the material world
  - iii. We live in an age of empiricism in which we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we understand something deeply if we understand *how* things happen
    - 1. People think they understand human behaviour if they are able to observe which part of the brain lights up when a certain action happens or if people recall certain memories
    - 2. As true as these things may be, they aren’t able to answer the “why” questions, or see into the meaning
    - 3. We don’t just live in a world of facts, we live in a world of facts *that contain meaning*
    - 4. Illustration of mice who live in a piano

- a. They think they can give up their ideas about a piano player creating music because they have just discovered that it's just hammers striking strings
    - b. The *how* is a less significant issue than the *why*
- iv. In this case, the particular case of epileptic seizures in this boy is more accurately called being "moonstruck"
  - 1. *Lunatic* – Luna = moon; tic = state of being
  - 2. These are people who are ruled by the moon
  - 3. In one sense, because the moon is to the sun as man is to God (a reflected image) people who live for themselves eventually lose their minds and are reduced to chaos
    - a. They are serving the creature instead of the Creator
    - b. The moon instead of the sun
    - c. People who live by their own light instead of by the light of the Son truly move into lunacy
  - 4. In a spiritual sense, there is the connotation of darkness associated with the night; also with moon cycles such as full moon provoking certain behaviours and an association with the dark spirit world
    - a. There is no indication that every case of seizures is spiritual in nature like this one is
    - b. There is also no indication that the seizures are the result of personal sin

- c. Rather, this boy has been afflicted with a demon who has attached himself to the boy's health condition
- d. Matthew Poole (putting all the gospel accounts together) –  
*“He begins to inquire what they were discoursing about; but was by and by interrupted with a certain man, who comes and falls down upon his knees before him, begging mercy for his son, who (as Matthew reports his condition) was lunatic and sore vexed, often falling into the fire, and often into the water. Mark saith, he had a dumb spirit, that it tore him, he often foamed and gnashed with his teeth. Luke saith, that it was the man's only child, that he had a spirit, that he cried out, it tare him, he foamed, and was bruised by it, &c. By the description of this young man's disease, it appeareth to have been what we call the falling sickness, wherein men fall down, foam, and beat themselves. With this disease the devil joined, so as at certain times of the moon this disease took him, and the devil acting with it, he was dumb, at least for the time, and fell sometimes into the fire, sometimes into the water, foamed, gnashed with his teeth, tore himself: this seems to have been his condition. The father (during Christ's absence) had attempted a cure by his disciples, but the text*

*saith they could not (the reason we shall hear afterward);  
upon this he crieth unto Christ for his help.”*

- e. Acknowledgement that there’s not a demon in every or even most health conditions
- f. And yet in this case there clearly is a deeply spiritual element

- v. When we think of our own condition, we should always remember that God made us as complete people, body and soul knit together
- vi. Real life has a way of showing us that sometimes the veil between body and soul gets thin so that body and soul can affect one another in fairly noticeable ways

3. V. 17, 18 – *“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.” 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.”*

- a. Despite the disciple’s lack of faith or insight at times, they are not faithless men, and so Christ’s words here about a faithless and twisted generation don’t seem to fit
- b. Mark’s account contains a bit more information
  - i. In that account, he describes how the scribes were present, arguing with the disciples with Jesus shows up
  - ii. None of the accounts give an exact explanation of what they’re arguing about

- c. Calvin, in his commentary provides what is likely the most straightforward explanation
  - i. Once again, we may be reminded of Moses coming down to find the people distracted and engaging in false worship
- d. Christ, Peter, James, and John have just been atop the Mount of Transfiguration
  - i. They have been blessed by scenes of glory and power
- e. Yet beneath them there are the reminders of sin and corruption, not only in the fact of the boy's illness, but also in the disciples inability to heal, as well as the criticism of the scribes
- f. Like the people of Israel who descended into chaos while Moses was away, we have here another scene of chaos while Christ is away
- g. The disciples are still quite green and unsuccessful in their healing of this boy, and no doubt the scribes are sure to remind them of their failure and of the weakness of their Master
- h. The argument between the disciples and the scribes is no doubt the focus of Christ's condemnation here
  - i. The scribes have already seen so much and rejected so much from Christ, and their hardness and unbelief is once again on display as they humiliate the servants of Jesus
- j. How often are Jesus's servants humiliated to this very day as our own society has become chaotic. Even in families or societies that have clearly been built up by Christ, things fall apart rapidly if He is out of the picture.

- i. The problem with so many of the criticisms that come our way is that there is often a nugget of truth in them
  - ii. We are often weak and impotent in our faith
  - iii. We often are not sure of the path forward
  - iv. We do struggle with sin and hypocrisy
  - v. Many of the criticisms are right, which can make the discouragement and the confusion that much more intense
- k. But Jesus loves His people, despite their imperfections
  - i. Any man worth his salt would take it as a direct attack if someone were to attack his wife
  - ii. Christ's bride is under assault here, and Christ shoulders it Himself
- l. He first of all curses that generation of Jewish religious leaders who are in this long, slow process of formally rejecting Him
  - i. The "this generation" language shows up again
  - ii. there is a special significance to the events of Christ's ministry and the generation to whom He is ministering, but of course we can make legitimate application to any generation of people who are not known for loving the Lord, but
- m. Because Jesus is the Second Adam and the true man of the human race, His example in masculine tenderness and masculine strength both show up here
  - i. He doesn't shame or embarrass the disciples for their lack of success
  - ii. He steps in and takes decisive responsibility for the situation



- iii. He is given the boy upon request and is immediately successful in casting out the demon
- 4. VV. 19, 20 – *“Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” 20 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.”*
  - a. Depending on your translation, some of you will have v.21 and some will not
  - b. V. 21 says *“But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting”*
  - c. The reason it is in a footnote instead of in the text is because many original manuscripts don’t contain this verse
    - i. By the time the older manuscripts were found, the verse numbers were already established, and so rather than recalibrating everything, some modern translations just move v.21 to a footnote
  - d. There is nothing in v.21 that is contrary to the text we’ve seen here, and it does make this account match up more closely with Mark’s (9:29)
  - e. Jesus’s intervention saved the disciples from being completely humiliated, and so once they are in private they try to understand the situation better – why were they unsuccessful?
  - f. In Mark’s account the father says that this demon has been afflicting the boy since he was very small
    - i. The longer he remains in this state, the more difficult it becomes
  - g. Spurgeon notes in this passage the importance of dealing with the spiritual wellbeing of children while they are still very young

- i. Why wait to teach them the things of the Lord, and give sinful habits and customs more time to attach themselves to their little hearts
  - ii. Sure, someone's faith will be more sophisticated at 30 than at 3, but isn't it precious to see a 3-year old who knows his heart is sick with sin and that he needs Jesus to forgive his sin? And then better yet to see the weight lifted off that little one's shoulders when we know with all the certainty of Scripture that his sins are forgiven when he trusts in Jesus?!
  - iii. Spurgeon reminds us to "*seek the salvation of children as children*"
- h. Christ takes this moment to teach His disciples and to encourage them to press in further and get stronger in their faith
- i. He's not saying that they didn't possess faith, but that it was weak
  - i. Perhaps they got distracted
  - ii. Perhaps they doubted the ministry to which Christ had called them
  - iii. Perhaps they started to believe the critics of Christ more than Christ Himself
  - iv. Perhaps they forgot the object of their faith and started to misdirect it somewhere other than on Christ and His power
- j. Whatever the case, Jesus reminds them that they need to think this one through; they need their faith to grow stronger
- k. He uses the kind of symbolic language here to teach that should instantly draw them back to His earlier sermons and illustrations – a mustard seed and a mountain

- l. The mustard seed language should remind us of Matthew 13 where Christ compares the growth of the kingdom to a mustard seed
  - i. Despite its small beginnings, it grows into a large tree
  - ii. The point here is that the small faith of the disciples is capable of growing
  - iii. It is capable of understanding Christ's purposes yet
    1. Slowly but surely these guys are going to catch on to what Jesus is doing with redemptive history and they'll be strong enough to press into it with full confidence and full strength
- m. And we have seen many mountains so far
  - i. There are mountains involved in many of Christ's sermons as well as in many of His mighty works
  - ii. Christ is saying here that this little mustard seed faith can grow and can start commanding mountains
    1. This kind of prophetic language is common already in the OT
    2. In Christ's ministry, we've seen the significance of many mountains in the OT
      - a. Sinai/Horeb
      - b. Daniel – Christ is a rock that hurtles from heaven and shatters the statue of human empires and replaces it with the mountain of His kingdom
        - i. This has been happening in stages already and is amazing in its accuracy as Christ comes after the

Roman Empire has just replaced the Roman Republic

ii. Now Christ has come to topple it over and replace it with His kingdom

1. This also happened with great accuracy as Rome went from official persecution to official Christianity (50%+) in less than 300 years

c. Malachi – mountain melting like wax

d. Zechariah – mountain splitting in half so streams can flow through it

3. When mountains shake and melt and break open, God is at work in redemptive history

a. Some commentators (Chilton/Wenham) have noted that Jesus says “*this mountain*” in specific application to the mountain of Jerusalem & the temple

b. If that is the case, then this metaphorical language will move into a very solid fulfillment when the destruction of the temple serves as the last gasp of the birth pangs as the old covenant expires after having given birth to the new covenant

4. this little mustard seed can and will conquer a mountain just like you sometimes see a little shoot making its way through the concrete

n. regardless of how much direct application we make to *that* mountain, an important lesson remains for all of us

## 5. SUMMARY/APPLICATION

a. In the last few passages, Jesus has been preparing His disciples for the final days of confrontation ahead of them as He gets ready to go into Jerusalem

b. Peter has confessed Christ as Lord

c. Christ then lays out His mission for the church, which is to take her place at Christ's side as He accomplishes the dominion mandate that the first Adam failed at

d. The church is promised victory even over the gates of hell; she follows her Husband in as He binds Satan and starts to plunder his stuff

e. And lest the victory of the mission of God sound too easy, a cross and martyrdom and suffering are the means by which it will be accomplished

f. Christ has shown Himself in His divine nature; He has shown Himself to be the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; the better Moses and the better Elijah

g. And after all that, in today's text, Christ shows up again not to humiliate His failing followers, but to strengthen them

i. He doesn't mock their failed efforts

ii. Rather, He acts like a man. He acts like a true husband must. He shoulders the responsibility on Himself and heals the boy

- iii. Then, rather than shaming the disciples in public, He patiently teaches them in private about the progress they still need to make and the growth that needs to happen
- h. Application for parenting/intergenerational discipleship at Trinity
- i. Are the men and the fathers of this church going to find their place in the story, and to lead and teach the way Christ leads and teaches?
  - i. Are those who are coming up the ranks willing to learn, and see correction as a path to greater strength rather than discouragement and humiliation?

## 6. CHARGE

- a. *In the story of the demon-possessed boy, we see the results of the fall coming into contact with the ministry of Christ's disciples. This is an early encounter in the long war for the cosmos. This war continues today, and so we can no doubt relate to the experience of these men as they encountered failure. Our faith is likewise too weak, too distracted, too misguided, too subject to doubts and to the accusations of those who oppose us. We remain a people in desperate need of the headship of Christ. Rather than humiliating us, He takes our failures and our deficiencies upon Himself. He shows us what sacrificial responsibility looks like, and in so doing teaches us how our faith can grow, not only in its strength, but also in its object – Jesus Christ Himself. So, the charge is this – when you encounter difficulty, setback, and even failure this week, remember that Christ is happy to shoulder your burden. He is not embarrassing you, but is training you to become stronger, wiser, less oriented to yourself and more to Him. Even if we are faithless, He remains faithful (2 Tim. 2:13a).*

## 7. BENEDICTION

- a. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 – *“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”*