

Text: Matthew 17:14-21

Title: An epileptic demon and the faith of a mustard seed.

Truth: Faith in God will result in the accomplishment of the impossible.

Date/Location: Wednesday April 20, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

In this message we are going to learn about a boy's severe health issue that was actually caused by a demon, and the faith that is required to live the life of a follower of Jesus.

I. A Boy with a Severe Health (?) Issue, v. 14-16

A. A father comes to Jesus, kneeling on his knees to Him and requesting help for his son. Imagine the desperation, the grief, the pain, the hopelessness he has thus far experienced.

B. The son is described with the following words in our English translations:

KJV: He is lunatick, and sore vexed

NAS: He is lunatic, and very ill

ESV, NET, NIV: he has seizures and he suffers terribly/greatly

NKJV: he is an epileptic and suffers severely

The KJV does not spell lunatick in correct modern English. It and the NAS are also not good translations because *lunatic* has a much different connotation today than the meaning of the Greek verb. Lunatic means crazy, as far as I understand its common usage. It does not denote a problem that extends to motor skills necessarily. The Greek word is something like *moonstruck* but it indicates seizures or what we would say are epileptic-like seizures.

Whether it was technically epilepsy does not matter. All the father knew was the symptom: his son often fell into dangerous places. He hopes that the boy can be healed.

C. This kind of behavior was understood to have a supernatural origin. In this case, it was indeed demonic in ultimate origin (verse 18-19).

D. 2,000 years ago, the people tended to understand this as a supernatural or spiritual kind of issue. We could easily fault them for this, because we know that not every problem has a supernatural origin, or at least we tend to think that way. That line of thought becomes a real problem when we slightly change the wording and say that “no problem has a supernatural origin.”

Today we have the exact opposite tendency as we suppose the ancients had. We would ascribe his condition to a medical/physical problem and discount the spiritual nature of it. We think of our own superiority in medical knowledge and how this would be fixable today—or theoretically fixable if we just knew what hormone, chemical, gland, or whatever was out of balance. We could buy a pill (or design one) to fix the problem.

But our “superior” knowledge that assigned such things to the physical realm is really no better than the ancient knowledge that assigned such things purely to a supernatural origin. Neither are entirely correct, but **the lack of scientific knowledge in the ancient world is no worse than the lack of humility of our own day. The over-reliance on spiritual explanations back then is no worse than our over-reliance on science and physical factors today.**

I would make the argument that we would be far better off today if we would back off our scientific hubris and at least recognize the *possibility* that some of our society’s “health” problems are spiritual problems or are symptoms of spiritual problems. There may be demon possession still going on today. I tend to think of those as the more extreme kinds of cases, but that is uncertain. From personal observation, I know that there are sin problems which are not inevitable results of physical afflictions, but the reverse: sin problems that contribute to physical afflictions.

This is unarguable based on the data: addictive sin tendencies can lead to physically destructive results.

But it is not as simple as saying one kind of problem leads to another kind of problem in one direction only. Addictions once activated can lead to further sin to aid in further chasing the addiction. There is an interplay, and feedback mechanism in place in our complex human condition.

We simply do not know all the particulars in every case. We do not have diagnostic tools—either Biblical or scientific—to ascertain demon possession, for instance. In some cases we may be focusing on a physical solution, but spitting into the wind as a underlying spiritual problem is going to pop up like whack-a-mole in another place once we “fix” a certain physical or chemical issue.

But the Bible does give us many tools to diagnose spiritual problems. And like when you are fixing on a car, if there are several problems, you often want to fix what you can with the tools you have to get it better, even if you cannot get it perfect.

Take this as a caution. Do not treat the ancient worlders with a condescending “poor ignorant creatures” mentality because they had spiritual concerns in their medical diagnoses. You may in the end be upbraided by them as “too arrogant in your supposed scientific knowledge because you ignore spiritual concerns.”

E. The father brought the son to a good group of people to help him—in fact, the best people, the 9 disciples that were not on the Mount of Transfiguration. But they could not do it. The man’s hopes were dashed. Jesus comes down from the mountain just in time.

The text does not tell us if the father thought it was a long-shot last ditch effort or if he was a man of faith. We learn from elsewhere that the father had his own challenges with faith (Mark 9:23-24) but that is not Matthew’s concern. The lesson of the passage is manifestly not about that point. It is about the *disciples’* inability and need for faith.

F. I learned something from my studies that I thought was interesting: the boy did not ask for help himself here. In fact, I am fairly certain that all or the vast majority of demon possession cases we see in the New Testament do not ask for help for themselves. This is because the demon does not want “help.” He wants to remain in the person and not be “disturbed.” You too may observe someone who does not want spiritual help and is not asking for it, but they *need* it and you may be just the person to give it to them.

II. The Lord's Rebuke of the Disciples and Healing of the Son,

v. 17-18

- A. The Lord rebuked the faithless and perverse generation, but I do *not* believe He is criticizing the father, who has done what he knew to do. The words have a broad application to the then-living generation but particularly to the most promising people of that generation—the disciples. 17:17 asks “how long shall I be/bear with you-all” (plural *you*, twice in that verse). And verse 20 points specifically to the disciples: the Lord's public rebuke is paralleled by his private one, both directed at the disciples “because of you-all's unbelief.” The father did not have all the time and instruction and provision of Jesus which the disciples did have. They were *way* more accountable than the father was.
- B. It takes a lot patience for the Lord to dwell with people who do not have faith in God. He certainly possesses that patience, but it is an unpleasant experience for Him.
- C. The Lord rebuked the demon and it was excommunicated from having anything to do with the boy. Whenever the Lord removed a demon, there was a fully-enforced personal protection order against the demon and, I am guessing, any of his colleagues as well. (Matthew 12:43 is not an example of this situation, for the text there does not say that the Lord cast out the demon; the demon simply “went out” of the person, apparently of his own accord.)

III. Private Review, v. 19-21

- A. In private, the disciples asked the question that they could not wait to ask: “Why couldn't we cast out that demon?” Perhaps they were too embarrassed to ask in public! In fact, they were humiliated before the people that were present. It was obvious that they did not produce the results that they were supposed to.
- B. The Lord's simple answer is: unbelief. They could not accomplish this work for the Lord because they did not trust God. They had been given authority to cast out demons (Matthew 10:1 and 8).

But this verse informs us that such power was not available “at will” or apart from belief in God in Christ.

- C. I ask myself, and I ask you: why is it that we do not accomplish the things of God? We could say “disobedience,” which is a lot of it. But we could also say underlying that disobedience is practical unbelief. We do not obey because we do not trust, and if you do not trust, you will not trust and obey. If you do not truly embrace what Christ has said, taking it as the word-of-God instead of as the word-of-men or the word-of-God-optional, then you will not obey what it says. And if you obey it, you do not truly believe it.
- D. This does not mean that you, or the disciples, are pagan unbelievers. They had faith, but they had very imperfect, incomplete faith. You do too if you are a follower of Jesus.
- E. The point is driven home by a vibrant illustration: faith as small as the proverbial mustard seed would allow a disciple to move a mountain. And, nothing would be impossible for you.
- F. Objection: Then why are not Christians moving mountains all the time? Well, those who do not have much faith cannot do so, and that would be many of us. And those who do have the right kind of faith have good insight into what God’s will is, and know that God does not want certain mountains moved out of their place. So they would not attempt to do so. The question takes the Lord’s point to the extent of ridiculousness. It is only an illustration!
- G. This does cause me a lot of pause to think. Nothing will be impossible? All those ministry things we would like to see done for God’s name and the good of people in this community—you mean that is not as impossible as it seems? All those spiritual difficulties that I face in my walk with the Lord—temptations, character improvements in holiness, thought life, etc. are in fact possible? Indeed.
- H. The presence of verse 21 is debated, with older manuscripts lacking the verse. The majority text manuscript family does contain the verse. And Mark 9:29 has most of it. The word *fasting* is debated at that location, though again the majority text includes *fasting*.

I. The point of the verse in question is that this particular “kind” of demon is especially difficult and requires a lot of dependence on God to remove it. Man is no match for the demonic realm, and must appeal to God for such removals. The disciples had not the faith at the time to do anything of difficulty.

Conclusion

Faith in God is not the same as confidence in self. Perhaps their faith in God had waned and an attitude of self-sufficiency had crept in. Let us examine ourselves to see if we are disobedient to God because we are relying on our own strength or not trusting fully in Him.

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