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Sermon Notes

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The Powerlessness of Unbelief

Matthew 17:14-20

I can hardly imagine what it must have been like for this young couple, a young man I knew in the first engineering job I had after college... they were on their honeymoon, had been married for just two days, celebrating by body surfing on the dramatic waves of Oahu in Hawaii

Suddenly, a particularly violent wave crashed the new husband down headfirst onto the sandy bottom, injuring him in a way that must have been terrifying

He lay there on the beach paralyzed... unable to move, unable to feel, unable to wiggle his fingers or toes

Soon he was whisked away to a hospital, his weeping bride stunned, paralyzed herself by fear of the future... was she now married to a quadriplegic? Would she spend the rest of her life spoon feeding a helpless husband?

As he lay there in the hospital bed, their future looked bleak indeed.

Thankfully for them, he'd merely suffered a temporary injury to the spinal column... a temporary shock to the system. Within days, he would recover all his functions and was completely healed. The relief they both felt must have been immense.

But his utter powerless... his helplessness... is a picture of us in our sin

It is the picture that comes through loud and clear in today's passage:

POWERLESSNESS...

What is power?

Different kinds of power: political power, military power, physical power, the power of beauty, electrical power, nuclear power, economic power, etc.

People like to see themselves as powerful... able to make a difference, to produce an effect

But the Bible portrays us spiritual as powerless... actually helpless

We are helpless to change our own nature

We are helpless in the face of our own sinfulness

We are helpless before the scourges of disease

We are especially proven helpless in the face of death

We are helpless to throw off the demonic oppression of Satan's kingdom

Above all, we are helpless to improve our spiritual standing with a holy God

We need a Savior!! And that is precisely why Christ came!!

Romans 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

In today's passage, we see Christ coming face to face with human powerlessness as He has so many times before in His ministry

We see the powerlessness of a boy who is demon-possessed and is thrown frequently into the fire or into the water

We see the powerlessness of his father, who is desperate to save the life of his tormented son

We see the powerlessness of the disciples who, through their lack of faith cannot heal this boy

But in the end, we see the powerlessness of the demon to oppose Christ... the powerlessness of disease to resist the healing Christ will give, the powerlessness of darkness to resist the light, powerlessness of unbelief when Christ wills to give faith

The final lesson of this passage is this:

If you believe in Christ, nothing is impossible for you!!!

This encounter with Christ stands as a timeless testimony to the power of faith to overcome our helplessness

I. From the Mountaintop to the Valley

A. Descending from the Mountaintop

1. Christ has just shared an incredible experience with His three closest disciples—Peter, John and James

2. there Christ had been transfigured before their very eyes... His face had shone with the radiance of heaven's glory.... His clothes too were brilliantly white and shining like the sun
3. a true mountaintop experience... but it couldn't last

B. The Valley of Humiliation

1. Mark's Gospel records this event with more detail than does Matthew
2. according to Mark, Jesus' enemies were attacking the nine apostles He'd left behind

Mark 9:14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.

3. they had, it seems, brought this demonized boy and his father to the apostles to see what they could do
4. as usual, these scribes (teachers of the law) were merely looking for an opportunity to discredit Jesus, this time by testing His apostles
5. Jesus' apostles had utterly failed, bringing disrepute to Jesus

II. The Plea of a Desperate Father

Matthew 17:14-16 When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

A. Powerlessness Breeds Desperation

1. the love of a father for a son among the strongest in the world
2. this father's anguish heightened by three factors
 - a. this son was an only son... it was the only child this poor man had
 - b. this son was suffering terribly, in daily agony
 - c. the man can do **nothing** for his son... he was **powerless**
3. he had heard of Jesus' reputation as a healer, but now perhaps his faith is destroyed by the disciples' failure

B. The Son's Desperate Condition

1. KJV: he was a “lunatic”... actually that is an almost literal translation of the Greek work
2. most modern translations = epilepsy
3. these seizures seemed to come with the waxing of the moon and to receded with its waning
4. the ancients believed the seizures came as a result of offending the moon god
5. this man believed rightly that it was brought on by a demon

Mark 9:17-18 "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid.

6. an epileptic seizure is a terrifying thing to watch as described in that passage!!
7. the man said the demon had robbed him of speech... the boy was now mute
8. even worse, this demon was trying to kill his son
 - a. the devil is a murderer, and so are his demons
 - b. this particular demon wanted to murder this man's son
 - c. he did this by often bring him into convulsions resulting in the boy throwing himself into the fire or the water

Mark 9:22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

- d. the fire might be a cooking fire in the house or any other kind of fire out in the farmyard or any other place
- e. the water might be a river, a pond, or even a deep well
- f. in any case, this desperate father had to be constantly vigilant to keep his son alive
9. finally, this condition was chronic... it had been going on **SINCE CHILDHOOD!!!**

C. Coming to Christ for Mercy

Matthew 17:14-15 a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said.

1. so this desperate father brings this son to Christ for mercy

2. he bows down before Christ as before a king, and he calls him "Lord"
3. however, the fact that the disciples could not cure him has probably damaged his faith in Christ; Mark shows us the damage to this man's faith:

Mark 9:22-23 But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." ²³ "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

III. The Plight of the Faithless Disciples

Matthew 17:16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him."

A. Focus on the Disciples' Failure

1. Literally: they had no power to heal... they were stripped, exposed, weak, helpless, ashamed, defeated, humiliated, a stinging setback
2. a test by Jesus' enemies... which the apostles failed miserably
3. this is an especially poignant failure, since Jesus had given the apostles the power to drive out demons, and they'd already exercised this power

Mark 3:14-15 He appointed twelve-- designating them apostles--that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons.

4. we don't know what they did, but we know what they didn't do... according to Jesus they should have prayed

Mark 9:28-29 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹ He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

5. but instead of calling on Almighty God, they tried technique... they rested on their own past experiences and successes

Luke 10:17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

B. The Root Issue: Unbelief

Matthew 17:19-20 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰ He replied, "Because you have so little faith.

1. we'll discuss this more fully in a moment
2. the bottom line here, they failed to trust in God's power working through them
3. they were independent... they looked to themselves

4. and with the enemies of Jesus looking on, and with the crowd looking on, they soon noticed that the demon was winning, and they could do nothing about it
5. so perhaps beads of sweat formed on their faces... perhaps they began to argue among themselves about the right words to say or the right things to do
6. but their faith was nowhere to be found

C. Jesus' Stinging Rebuke

Matthew 17:17 "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me."

1. this is one of the bitterest things Jesus ever said to his disciples
 - a. Christ had a powerful emotional life... His reaction here displays some of those emotions
 - b. At another time, Jesus was angry with His disciples for forbidding children from coming to him
 - c. Here, He is angry with them for their lack of faith
2. two powerful words: unbelieving... perverse
 - a. "unbelieving" in the NT can refer to a complete unbeliever... one who has rejected the gospel, who lives like a pagan
 - b. "perverse" means corrupt, turned off the right path
3. Christ's lament over our hardness of heart

how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?

- a. It's as though our ongoing sin and unbelief is a burden to Him
- b. It taxes His patience to continue to bear with their sluggish and unbelieving hearts

However, He will not leave the boy demonized... nor the father desperate... nor his disciples faithless... nor his enemies triumphant

Now stand back and see the awesome power of Christ!!

Here at last Christ puts Himself on display... in His power and His mercy!!

For He says

Bring the boy here to me.

IV. The Power of Our Sovereign Lord

Matthew 17:18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

A. The Power of Christ Hidden

1. Christ's glory is hidden again
2. to His enemies, and to the desperate father, and perhaps even a little to His own disciples He looks like a mere man, or perhaps at most a prophet
3. so the encounter with the desperate father makes sense

Mark 9:22-23 But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." ²³ "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

- a. "If you can do anything...???"
- b. There was not a man there who fully grasped the kind of power Jesus has
 - Through Christ Almighty God made the heaven and the earth
 - Through the power of Christ, God holds together the very atoms of the universe
 - Through Christ, the distant galaxies were created
 - Through Christ, the sun and moon were cast into space
 - Through Christ the earth was populated with every species of animal, bird, fish, and insect
 - Before Christ all the holy angels bow and shield their faces
 - Christ is the center of God's pleasure... the greatest love He has in the universe
4. there is not a person here today that understands fully how powerful Christ is, whose faith is equal to the greatness of Christ's person or the soaring nature of His promises

B. Christ Reveals His Power Once Again

1. already Christ has done a river of miracles in Palestine

2. He has all but banished the demons and disease from Galilee for a brief three year period
3. and what brought this father to desperation, and what had totally stumped his disciples, Christ now does with the greatest of ease

Matthew 17:18 Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment.

4. Mark's fuller account makes it very poignant:

Mark 9:25-27 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

- a. the demon, upon seeing Jesus, convulses and writhes, screaming with the agony of the stabbing light of the glory of Christ's person, though that glory was hidden to the physical eyes
- b. the demon knew the power, the authority of Jesus
- c. the demon knew that someday Christ would consign him to eternal torment in the lake of fire
- d. so the demon recoils in terror and abject hatred
- e. BUT when Jesus rebukes him, when Jesus commands him to come out, the demon MUST obey

C. The Healing Was Permanent... But Temporary

1. Jesus commanded the demon never to enter the boy again... and the demon obeyed; Matthew tells us the boy was healed from that moment on
2. I can scarcely imagine the joy in the father's heart, and the joyful conversation they must have had on the way home, discussing the awesome power of Jesus Christ
3. yet for all of that, the miracles of Jesus were merely temporary... signs of a future healing
4. someday, that demon-possessed boy would die and his body would be cast not into the fire or the water, but into the tomb

5. and just as only Jesus could rescue the boy from the demon, so also only Jesus could rescue him from the tomb
6. the true healing of every bodily disease and infirmity is the resurrection of the body at the final day

1 Corinthians 15:42-45 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.

V. The Primacy of Faith

Matthew 17:19-20 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰ He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

A. The True Lesson Here: Overcoming Unbelief

1. the great enemy here was a disease far greater than epilepsy: UNBELIEF
2. epilepsy cannot condemn the soul... but unbelief can
3. the disciples could not see Jesus... He was up on the mountain
4. therefore, they thought they were on their own... they forgot their heavenly Father
5. Jesus constantly fought against the unbelief of His disciples... even to the very end of His time on earth

During the storm on the sea of Galilee, Jesus was asleep... the disciples were terrified, and woke Him saying, "We're going to drown!!!"

Luke 8:24-25 He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. ²⁵ "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

So also at the very end of His ministry, He worked on "Doubting Thomas's" unbelief

John 20:27-29 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

6. The Unbelief of the Father

- a. He kneels before Jesus and calls Him Lord
- b. BUT he says to him “If you can do anything, please help...!”
- c. So Jesus rebukes this man’s lack of faith...

Mark 9:23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

- d. The man gave a classic answer

Mark 9:24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

B. What Is Faith?

1. Five aspects of true faith

- certainty of invisible spiritual truth
- assurance of things hoped for
- rebuke for sin
- reliance on Christ
- guidance from God

2. unbelief seen here: primarily, they didn’t rely on God

3. Jesus said they were up against a powerful demon... but such a demon could only come out by prayer

Mark 9:28-29 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" 29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

- a. WHAT??!! They forgot to PRAY???? They didn’t even ask God?
- b. They sought to heal this boy through their own efforts??
- c. That is the essence of unbelief... self-reliance!!

4. two additional comments

- a. some manuscripts add the words “and fasting”... but there is evidence these words were added by monks much later and were not part of the original text

b. second: clearly some situations are harder than others... sometimes the exercise of faith is immensely difficult. This demon was a particularly tough challenge... he caused the boy to writhe and foam when he saw Jesus... he was ready for a fight

c. they needed to be ready to stand firm in faith through the test

C. The Remedy to Unbelief: How Faith Grows

1. understand faith... and its growth

faith can grow... it can get greater and greater:

2 Thessalonians 1:3 your faith is growing more and more

a. in one sense faith can be great or small

Matthew 17:20 "Because you have so little faith.

Matthew 8:10 "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

b. In another sense, it really is not the quantity of faith, but the application of it NOW, HERE, to THIS SITUATION that makes faith powerful and active

Matthew 17:20 I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

So, begin by bringing to Christ your desire for a greater faith

2. Go to Christ... Heb. 12:2 says **He is the author and perfecter of faith**

3. acknowledge honestly what the father said

Mark 9:24 "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

4. feed it with the word

Romans 10:17 faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Faith searches the written word of God for promises... for it is impossible for God to break a promise

So, if you want greater faith, saturate your mind in the promises of God

Puritan Thomas Manton said of praying the promises of God:

“Show Him His writing; God is tender of His word.”

- a. So also the commands of God are food for faith
 - i) The disciples were commanded to drive out demons in Matthew 10
 - ii) This command should have given them faith!! Christ will never command us to do something without giving us the power to do it

5. feed it with rich experiences in which you are stretched... evangelism, missions, “stepping out in faith”

6. remember Christ’s past faithfulness in your life

D. The Rewards of Faith

1. the moving of mountains

- a. a proverbial expression... the doing of the seemingly impossible
- b. faith recognizes the unlimited power of God
- c. faith applies that ethereal power, that invisible power, to THIS MOUNTAIN... with all its rocks, trees, dirt, mountain goats, etc.
- d. faith takes the promise of God and applies it here and now to this problem
- e. and all it takes is this small motion in your soul... “God is here. God can do this. God is powerful. God is loving. God has commanded this. God has promised this. God will do this.”
- f. That tiny mustard seed of faith then relies on God to do what only He can do

2. what rewards? Immense joy when the mountain moves!

- a. When the boy is healed
- b. When the sinner is converted
- c. When the money suddenly appears for paying the rent
- d. When the government official inexplicably changes his mind and allows the mission team to enter the village and set up their medical clinic
- e. When the Berlin Wall falls and European communism comes to an end
- f. When the power of the Spirit falls on a whole people group in Irian Jaya and all of them become Christians in a single day

- g. When your bitter sin habit of lust or anger or laziness or pride lies dead at your feet, when you have finally overcome a temptation, you will have moved a mountain by faith