

## **Week 20: *Matthew 17:14–27***

### **Hook**



**Main Point: Even the smallest amount of faith in our big God can move mountains.**

What kinds of experiences in your life have helped grow your faith? For many, the seasons that most spur spiritual growth are marked by adversity; one such season for many was the initial phase of the coronavirus. The virus would have seemingly done great harm for the spiritual lives of churchgoers; according to a late April Pew Research study, 91 percent of U.S. adults who attend religious services at least monthly reported that their congregation had closed services to the public. Yet, that same research found that 24 percent of those polled claimed that as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, their own religious faith had become stronger.<sup>1</sup>

**Q: How would you answer the survey question “As a result of the coronavirus outbreak, my religious faith has become stronger, weaker or hasn’t changed much”?**

**Q: How does God grow your faith?**

**Q: In what ways does your degree of faith impact the way in which God can use you to make an impact?**

## Week 20: Matthew 17:14–27

### Book

**Main Point:** Even the smallest amount of faith in our big God can move mountains.

**Matthew 17:14–20 (there is no verse 21 in the ESV, see note below) [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Faith in God can do the impossible because God can do the impossible.

**Q: Does this passage mean that all of us who follow Jesus should be able to cast out demons (or anything else we want!) if only we have enough faith? If not, what does it mean?**

**Q: Why was Jesus able to cast out the demon but His disciples weren't?**

In this story, Jesus chastised His disciples for having “so little” faith, just as He did when they were afraid of the storm, *twice* (Matthew 8:26; 14:31), and when they didn't understand His warning to beware the yeast of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:8). But what does Jesus mean by “so little” faith? What is “enough” faith? Is a basic faith in Jesus enough or is there a “next level” of faith needed to perform miracles? And yet another level of faith needed to perform really hard miracles on really tough cases?

Many times in Scripture, Jesus seemed to connect faith with healing. So often, Jesus praised a person's faith and then healed them or even explicitly said, “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34; Luke 8:48; 17:19; 18:42) or, “According to your faith be it done to you” (Matthew 9:29). When you read some parts of the Gospels, it sounds as if Jesus healed everyone of everything wherever He went. “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing *every* sickness and *every* affliction” (Matthew 9:35).

But sometimes, He only healed a few sick people. Not everyone. When He came to His hometown of Nazareth, He only healed *a few* sick people; He did not do many miracles there “because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58). Their lack of faith did not incapacitate Him. God's power cannot be controlled by how much faith we have or don't have, as if He were a magician doing tricks for us on command. It was because the city had rejected Him and His message. It wasn't that they didn't have “enough” faith; they didn't believe in Him at all.<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus' power cannot be controlled by our faith or our lack of it. And He proves that in this story. The disciples could not heal this boy because of their lack of faith, but Jesus could. And He did, instantly, with just a word (v. 18). What seemed very difficult or even impossible to the disciples, Jesus did without breaking a sweat. This story isn't as much about showing how little faith the disciples had, but about showing just how much power Jesus had. We can tell because of His words to them – even faith *the size of a mustard seed* can move mountains. He wasn't telling them they needed a big, super-sized amount of faith to do the really hard stuff. It only takes the tiniest amount of faith. Because the power is not in our faith, it's in Jesus.

A mustard seed was the smallest seed known to their culture, so even the very smallest amount of faith they could imagine could move mountains. Ancient people thought of mountains as being rooted far beneath the earth, so the phrase “moving mountains” was a typical Jewish rabbi’s way of saying “doing the impossible.”<sup>iii</sup> Even the *smallest bit of faith* in Jesus can do the impossible. Jesus told them the same thing later when, talking about a rich man entering the kingdom, He said, “With man this is impossible, but with God *all things* are possible” (Matthew 19:26). With God, the impossible becomes possible with just the tiniest amount of faith. This wasn’t about the disciples getting “enough” faith to do miracles, as if that were next-level Christianity. It was about trusting in Jesus to do the impossible.

As Paul wrote in Ephesians, “[Faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Faith isn’t a “work,” it’s a gift. It’s not about us; it’s about Jesus, so that no one can boast in his own spiritual “accomplishments” but only in Jesus. It’s not about *how much* faith we’re putting into it, it’s about *who* we’re putting our faith in. Our relationship with Jesus isn’t transactional – if you put in X amount of faith, you get X amount of miracles. As Jimmy Draper wrote in *Baptist Press*:

*The Scripture never tries to quantify faith. Faith is simply described. [In Matthew 17], Jesus rebuked their “little faith” and went on to say, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed ... nothing will be impossible to you.” Jesus was making a strong point that it isn’t the size of the faith that matters, but where and under what circumstances the seed is planted. The mustard seed was the smallest garden variety of seed (Matthew 13:32). If God is the sole object of our faith, then all things are possible for the believer because all things are possible for the One in whom faith’s seed is planted.*<sup>iv</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah described the “man who trusts in the Lord” as a “tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream” while the man whose heart turns away from the Lord who is “like a shrub in the desert” (Jeremiah 17:5–8). The difference between the two trees is where they are planted, meaning what (or Whom) they have put their trust in. That’s why even the tiniest bit of faith can move mountains. Because God can do the impossible. Because it’s not about the amount of faith you have, it’s about Whom your faith is in.

**Q: How has God shown Himself able to do the impossible in the past in your life or in the life of someone else you know personally?**

**Q: What situations in your life, your community, or the world feel impossible to you right now?**

**Q: What would it look like, practically, for you to put your faith in God to handle those things according to His will?**

A note about verse 21: If you notice, there is no verse 21 in the ESV. The KJV includes verse 21, “But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” This verse is not in the best, oldest New Testament manuscripts, so scholars believe it is a later addition to the text, not original. None of the newer translations include it, including ASV, CEV, ESV, HCSB, NIV, and NRSV.<sup>v</sup>

### **Matthew 17:22–23 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Though Jesus had the power to move mountains, He would suffer and die.

**Q: What does the juxtaposition of the statement “nothing is impossible with faith” with the statement that Jesus would suffer and die tell us about Christ and His mission?**

**Q: Why were the disciples filled with grief? How would you feel if you were the disciples? What would you think about these two stories happening back to back?**

Jesus had just told them that nothing would be impossible for them if they only had the smallest amount of faith. And then, immediately afterward, He told them He would be delivered into the hands of men and killed. How could this man, whom they had seen calm the storm and feed the 5,000 and raise people from the dead, be killed? How could the man they had seen transfigured on the mountain, who was the Son of the living God, be killed? He had just told them nothing would be impossible *for them* as His disciples. How could this happen to *Him*?

The juxtaposition of these two stories would have been confusing to the disciples, but it speaks volumes to us about who Jesus was and why He came. He was the Son of God. He did have unlimited power and authority and glory, but He chose to empty Himself, take on the form of a servant, and humble Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–8). Jesus could have easily stopped this from happening. At any point – during His trial, while He was being beaten, as He hung on the cross – He could have stopped it all. Remember how the crowd mocked Him? “Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” (Matthew 27:40). He could have done that. But He didn’t. He chose to follow through with the sacrifice because of His great love for us (John 15:13). He asked God if there were another way, but He willingly submitted Himself to God’s will, no matter how hard it would be for Him (Matthew 26:36–46). Can you imagine how much self-control it must have taken to hang there on that cross, knowing He had the power to save Himself and choose not to do it? How much trust He had to have in God, in the mission? How much love He had to have for us?

This was also a sign to the disciples of what their lives would be like, of the road they would walk. They would be given incredible power. They would do miracles, cast out demons, preach boldly, start a revolution, and change the whole world forever. But their paths would also lead to suffering, persecution and martyrdom. Before they got too excited about the incredible power He promised them, they needed to know that the life of a disciple wasn’t about power

and honor in a worldly sense. In this upside-down kingdom, the meek inherit the earth, the first are last, and the most powerful man who ever lived gave His life as a sacrifice.<sup>vi</sup>

These were the same men who argued about who was greatest among them and who would sit on His right and His left in the kingdom (Matthew 18:1–4; 20:21). It would be easy for them to hear Jesus say, “Nothing will be impossible for you” and get grand ideas about all the amazing things they would do. But Jesus followed it up with an immediate reminder that He would be killed. He started telling them about His mission to suffer and die in the previous chapter, but Peter rebuked Him, not understanding that this was what it meant to be the Messiah and what it meant to be His disciple (Matthew 16:21–28). Jesus told Peter he was setting his mind on the things of man, not the things of God (Matthew 16:23). Peter didn’t understand Christ’s mission because he was thinking with a worldly perspective, not a kingdom perspective. That is how different God’s kingdom is from the world. Peter could not even imagine a Messiah who would suffer and die.

The disciples wouldn’t really understand all of this. Not until after Jesus had died and been raised. And once they did, they considered it an *honor* to suffer for the Gospel (Acts 5:41). After he was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this same Peter, who rebuked Jesus about saying He would suffer and later denied Him out of fear for his own life, would tell the same religious leaders who killed Jesus that he would not stop preaching about Jesus no matter what they threatened to do to him (Acts 4:20). One day Paul would boast in His sufferings and weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:21–33) and say he would rather die, but he would stay if God still had work for him to do (Philippians 1:18–26). But for now, the disciples were “greatly distressed” (v. 23). They still didn’t understand what Messiah came to do. They were still looking for the conquering hero, not the suffering servant.<sup>vii</sup>

Even though Jesus had *just* told them that whoever wanted to be His disciple must deny Himself, take up his cross, and lose his life, they were still distressed by Jesus’ saying He would die. It would take the cross, the Resurrection, 40 days of teaching afterward, the Ascension, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost for them to truly understand. This is how upside-down the whole idea of a Messiah who would die was to them! It may sound normal to us because we have heard it our whole lives, but it was absolutely radical to them.

**Q: How does Christ’s willingness to suffer and die make you feel about your own life, your purpose, and your mission?**

**Q: How does the disciples’ (later) persecution and sacrifice compare to your own experience of following Jesus?**

**Q: In what ways is God calling you to suffer and sacrifice for the kingdom?**

**Matthew 17:24–27 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** God will supernaturally provide what we need for our mission.

**Q: Why did Jesus say they were free from obligation to the tax? Why did He still pay it?**

**Q: Why would Jesus care about not offending the tax collectors?**

Since the end of the Maccabean period (the revolt that the Jewish holiday of Channukah celebrates), adult Jewish males throughout the entire Empire had paid an annual two-drachma tax for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem, based on Exodus 30:13. In Jesus' day, before the fall of the temple in A.D. 70, the funds raised by this tax were so enormous that the temple leaders had to create new things to spend the money on, such as constructing a massive golden vine. The tax was not compulsory, but most people paid it willingly.<sup>viii</sup> There were a few Jewish sects – the Sadducees and the Essenes – who refused to pay it.<sup>ix</sup> Tradition also said that those living off of charity, as Jesus and His disciples did, did not have to pay the temple tax, which is why the tax collectors would have asked Peter, rather than just demanding it.<sup>x</sup>

To understand Jesus' words to Peter in this story, it is very important to remember that this is a temple tax, not a tax from the Roman government. When Jesus referenced the "sons" of the kings not having to pay taxes to their fathers, he was not talking about paying taxes to the "kings of the earth." He was using this as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. When earthly kings levy taxes, they don't include their sons in those taxes. When it comes to the temple, God is the king, and Jesus and His disciples were His sons, so they didn't have to pay the temple tax.<sup>xi</sup> Jesus wasn't talking about whether to submit to or pay taxes to earthly kings, though the Bible speaks to that in other places (Matthew 22; Romans 13). He was talking about whether the disciples were obligated to pay this tax to God.

It is also important to understand that this is *not* talking about a tithe. This passage doesn't exempt us from tithing or also giving generously above and beyond our tithe to the poor and to other freewill offerings. Though this temple tax was *based on* God's law in Exodus 30:11–16, the half-shekel offering in Exodus 30 was a one-time offering the people of Israel at that time made to the tabernacle "to make atonement for [their] lives." This was not commanded to be done annually in Exodus. Only later, in the second temple period (after they returned from the exile), did the religious leaders start requiring this "tax" annually.<sup>xii</sup>

Many of Jesus' contemporaries believed this tax was even necessary to affect the atonement of the sacrifices for them. If people didn't pay the temple tax, the sacrifices didn't "work" and they would still be unclean. But Jesus was making it clear that His disciples didn't depend at all on the temple, its sacrifices or the tax. They were sons of God. Their atonement didn't come through paying a tax or even offering animal sacrifices. It would come through Christ Himself.<sup>xiii</sup>

They didn't have to pay the tax, and yet Jesus paid it anyway so as "not to give offense to [the religious leaders]" (v. 27). This is fascinating because Jesus challenged the religious leaders all the time in other places. He challenged their view of the Sabbath. He called them whitewashed tombs and hypocrites. Why was He concerned about offending them now? Bible scholar Craig S. Keener explains, "Jesus has offended ('caused to stumble') members of the religious establishment before, but this is an unnecessary 'stumbling block' because it addresses ones'

own rights rather than the truth of God's kingdom (18:6; 1 Corinthians 8:13; 9:12). Disciples need to be ready to surrender their privileges and 'rights' for the sake of the gospel."<sup>xiv</sup>

This wasn't about the way they were misinterpreting God's Word or abusing the flock under their care, it was just about paying a small tax. No big deal; just do it. It is much like what Paul said about eating or not eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. You may know you have the freedom to do it, but if it's a stumbling block to a weaker believer, then don't eat it. No big deal. You may have the "right" to do it, but it's not hurting you not to do it. So just don't do it (1 Corinthians 8:7–13).

But Jesus didn't just tell Peter to pay the tax out of their common purse, which they probably could have done; they were being supported by many wealthy benefactors at this point, many of whom were women according to Luke (Luke 8:1–3). He told Peter to go fishing. Peter would find a shekel (four drachmas, enough for two Jewish males) in the first fish he caught. Many fables at the time, both Greek and Jewish, told of God's blessing pious people by having them find precious objects in fish.<sup>xv</sup>

God did not require them to pay the tax, and yet He would supernaturally provide the money to pay it. This is a sign of God's provision and power. But it would have also been significant to Peter because of his former life as a fisherman and how Jesus redefined his life and promised to make him a "fisher of men." As Peter went on this mission, as a fisher of men, the Lord would supernaturally guide and provide for him. He just had to listen and obey.

**Q: Why are we so hesitant to surrender our privileges and rights for the Gospel? Why would doing so make us more like Jesus and the other disciples?**

**Q: What specific examples can you think of in your own life? Are there ways you can surrender your "rights" to help keep someone else from stumbling that are similar to just paying this tax even though you don't have to, or not eating the meat that has been sacrificed to idols even though you know you can?**

**Q: In what ways has God supernaturally provided for you in the past? In what ways do you need to trust Him now?**

## **Week 20: *Matthew 17:14–27***

### **Took**

**Main Point: Even the smallest amount of faith in our big God can move mountains.**

Ask members of your group to close their eyes. Challenge them to reflect for a moment on something God-honoring that they have deemed unlikely if not impossible in their lives. Perhaps this is the rebuilding of a marriage, healing of a loved one, the salvation of a friend who has consistently rejected the Gospel. Lead the group in a time of prayer, asking them to focus particularly on that issue. Encourage them to pray sincerely that they place their faith in the Lord, that they give the outcome of the situation to Him. Ask the group to pray for repentance if perhaps they have neglected prayer concerning the issue. Conclude the prayer by thanking the Lord for being a God of the impossible.

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** In what ways do you struggle with faith? Why is it hard for you to trust in Jesus to be your all-in-all, to provide for you, to guide you in His paths? Why does it feel hard to have even mustard-seed faith sometimes? What would it look like for you to walk in faith?

**PRAY:** For God to reveal to you how He wants you to step out in faith. Where is He leading you that might be out of your comfort zone? What is He asking you to do that may seem impossible? What is He asking you to surrender or sacrifice for the Gospel? After you have spent time in prayer, ponder these things.

**ACT:** Step out in faith. Whatever God spoke to you in your prayer, do it. Step out in faith, trusting that He will guide you in the way you should go and provide for you along the way. Take one specific step of faith in that direction this week.



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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/>

<sup>ii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>iii</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>iv</sup> Jimmy Draper, "DOCTRINE: Is Faith Required for Healing?" *Baptist Press*, Apr 20, 2007 - <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/doctrine-is-faith-required-for-healing/>

<sup>v</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol 8* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

<sup>vi</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>vii</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>viii</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BC-66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

<sup>ix</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

<sup>x</sup> J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1970).

<sup>xi</sup> J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1970).

<sup>xii</sup> J. Liver, "The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature" *Harvard Theological Review* Vol 56, Issue 3 (July 1963), 173–198.

<sup>xiii</sup> William G. Thompson, "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community: Matthew 17:22–18:35" *Analecta Biblica* 44 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970).

<sup>xiv</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>xv</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of The Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).