

Prayer & Fasting – Matthew 17:14-21

I. INTRODUCTION

A. “You’ll Die!”

1. One day, Tom announced to his family that he was going to fast and pray.
2. Ginny, his 5-year-old, had recently learned that fasting meant not eating.
3. “No!” she shouted. “You can't fast! You'll die!”
4. Her dad carefully explained that many men and women fasted in Bible times.
5. Ginny paused a moment, then as with a flash of insight she said, “Yeah, and they’re all died!”

B. Goofy Ideas

1. Fasting is a largely misunderstood discipline of the Christian life.
2. Yet Jesus said that it played a vital role in developing spiritual depth & strength.
3. Let’s take a look at fasting today.
4. Our text is a fascinating story that’s included in MM&L.
5. By combining all 3 accounts we get a rich picture of what happened.
6. Jesus is returning from the Mt. of Transfiguration w/ PJ&J when He encounters a brouhaha between the other 9 disciples and some scribes.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 14-16

14 And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, ¹⁵ “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. ¹⁶ So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him.”

1. Mark adds some important details to the story.
 - a. as Jesus, along with PJ&J, returned from the Mt., He found a crowd gathered round a debate between the other 9 disciples & some scribes who had brought this father and his son to them.
 - b. the son was severely afflicted with a demon which had nearly succeeded in killing the boy several times.
 - c. the challenge they had presented to the disciples was to heal & deliver him!
 - d. but try as they might, the disciples couldn’t, and the scribes were using this as a beachhead of attack on them, & on Jesus as their leader.
2. You see, these scribes had only heard *reports* of Jesus’ power over demons, and they’d come to see it for themselves –
 - a. or *really*, to present a case that was in their minds *impossible*.
 - b. Mark tells us that the boy was *both deaf & mute*.
 - c. in a couple previous Wednesday night studies recently we’ve seen how a

- mute, demon-possessed person was considered by the Jews to be an absolutely impossible case to heal.
- 1) according to their traditions & way of working with the demon possessed, the key to deliverance was to get the demon to give up it's name.
 - 2) once the name was discovered, the exorcists would invoke the Name of God as *superior* to the name of the demon, and cast it out.
 - 3) if the demon could make it's victim *mute*, then it was safe because its name would never be discovered.
 - 4) the mute, demon-possessed were considered **IMPOSSIBLE** cases!
- d. the usual Jewish exorcism was a long, drawn-out, complex, & exhausting event.
 - e. but *twice* now in Matthew's story of Jesus, we've seen Him deliver a mute possessed person with nothing more than a word!
 - f. this absolutely stunned the crowds and caused His fame to spread all the more rapidly.
3. But *these* scribes were not there when the others were delivered, and they were not going to take their testimony as fact.
 4. ***They just knew*** that Jesus was a fraud, and they were going to ***prove it***.
 - a. they were the original "Amazing Randy's" – confirmed skeptics who would not accept even the *possibility* of a miracle.
 - b. they saw themselves as *debunkers* and had come to dispense with Jesus and his lot once and for all.
 - c. so they searched around for ***what they knew absolutely*** to be an impossible case – someone who exhibited the symptoms of demon-possession who was not only mute, but deaf too!
 - d. not only could he not give up his name, ***he couldn't even hear*** anything said to him!
 5. Earlier in ch. 16, these guys had come to Jesus and asked for a sign.
 - a. He refused to cater to their whim for ***i*** sign when He'd given more than enough to convince them, if they ***could*** be convinced.
 - b. you see, ***that was the problem*** – they ***couldn't***, no matter what Jesus did!
 - c. any sign he gave them, they would explain away; they were confirmed skeptics,
 - 1) like Voltaire, the famous French philosopher and skeptic;
 - 2) a hostile critic of Christianity who was so determined to oppose the faith that he once said that even if he saw a miracle with his own eyes,
 - 3) he would rather deny & distrust what his eyes showed him than accept a miracle had occurred.
 - d. that's the kind of unbelief the scribes had, and it's why Jesus refused to show them another sign.
 - e. besides, they already had ***all the signs they could possible ever need*** in the prophetic word which foretold the ***very day in which they lived*** and that the Messiah would come ***at that time!***
 - f. these guys were scribes, ***experts*** in the Word who'd memorized entire books of the OT.
 - g. they knew the prophecies regarding the time of the coming of the Messiah,

- h. but they had *spiritualized* them rather than taking them literally, and missed the *greatest sign* of all – *fulfilled prophecy!*
 - i. Jesus knew such men would *not* be convinced by one more sign, so He refused & called them a wicked & adulterous generation because their hearts were hardened toward God and turned toward the love of the praise of men.
6. These scribe reasoned thus - if Jesus will not bring a sign *to them*, then they will bring a *challenge to Him* – this demon-possessed deaf-mute.
 7. Not finding Jesus, because He was on the Mt. with PJ&J, they went to the other 9 and issued the challenge! But the 9 were not able to cure the boy.
 8. This prompted an angry debate between the disciples & scribes, which the crowd eagerly watched.
 9. Jesus returned while the debate was in full swing.
 10. He asked the scribes what the brouhaha was over and that's when the father of the boy stepped forward to explain.
 - a. he told Jesus about what had happened so far.
 - b. he'd brought his poor son to the disciples and they'd not been able to cure him.

B. Vs. 17-18

17 Then Jesus answered and said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me.”

1. In light of the boy's pathetic condition, this reaction of Jesus seems rather harsh.
 - a. it just doesn't fit with the mercy & compassion we've seen as so central to Jesus' attitude up till now.
 - b. what's going on here – is he getting tired and frustrated?
 - c. no – these words aren't aimed at the father or the disciples for their failure to heal the lad.
 - d. these words are aimed at the same guys to whom he called a wicked and adulterous generation – the scribes!
 - e. Jesus is ticked that they have used this tormented boy and his grief-stricken father as a trap for Him!
 - f. they care *nothing* for the plight of this poor family, but see a way to make use of them in their opposition to Him!
 - g. they're using the misery of others as the means of *reinforcing* their own unbelief.
 - h. in the minds of the scribes, Jesus was **NOT** going to heal this boy: **HE COULDN'T!** It was utterly impossible!
 - 1) and that's why they were arguing with the disciples –
 - 2) when they weren't able to perform the healing the scribes said, “See! It's all a sham!”
 - 3) the disciples were saying, “We don't know why we can't help this boy, but wait till Jesus gets here – *He'll do it.*”
2. So here's Jesus, and He's *appalled* at the determined attitude of unbelief on the

- part of the scribes.
3. Sadly, caught in the middle is this poor man and his son – and while Jesus is angry with the scribes, He has nothing but compassion for the boy and asks that he be brought.
 4. In v. 15, Matthew tells us the boy was an *epileptic*.
 - a. the word is “**lunatic**”; literally, *moonstruck*.
 - b. epilepsy was thought to be effected by the phases of the moon.
 - c. the ancient world attached spiritual significance & power to the heavenly bodies; this is where astrology comes from.
 - d. different phases of the sun, moon, and stars were thought to exert different influences on people.
 5. From the description of this boy's symptoms the Gospel writers give, we'd say he had *seizures*.
 - a. he'd fall down, foam at the mouth, cry out, shake, and then go rigid.
 - b. what was unusual about *his* seizures is that they *regularly* occurred when he was near something dangerous - like fire & water.
 - c. this was *more* than mere epilepsy – it was a severe form of demon-possession and had begun when he was just a youngster.
 6. Mark tells us when the boy was brought forward, as soon as he saw Jesus, the demon reacted and a horrible fit began!
 7. The boy was thrown violently to the ground, began thrashing about, and foamed at the mouth.
 8. Jesus asked the father how long this had been going on. The father said since he was a lad and that it's obvious the demon wanted to kill the boy since he often fell into the fire or water.
 9. Then Mark records the father saying this –
“If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”
 10. From the way Mark tells the story, it appears that the father had been something of a half-hearted accomplice to the scribes.
 - a. but *this* fit, this display of torment in his son renewed his sense of need and desperation, so he ventured a half-sincere request.
 - b. his faith is *not yet* where it needs to be.
 - c. if Jesus were to heal the boy at this point, a vitally important lesson would be lost on the father, the scribes, the crowd, and even the disciples.
 - d. so Jesus pressed a bit more to bring the man into a fuller and more sound faith.
 11. Jesus said to him -
“If you can believe – all things are possible to him who believes.”
 - a. the father's request had been *unspecific* before – ‘If You can do **ANYTHING** – Help!’
 - b. Jesus repeated the words back to Him – “If you can believe, you can *have* anything!”
 12. The crucial issue was **believing** something *specific* – not just some unfocused request.
 13. Real faith is not some kind of spiritual force; it's not a mental state of openness to the cosmic energies.
 14. Contrary to a lot of goofy teaching about faith today, it's not being a *possibility*

thinker or being a *positive person*.

15. Genuine faith has an object, and faith is only as good as what its object is.
16. This man needed to come to the place where he could look at the Person of Jesus,
 - a. not stories he'd heard *about* Him,
 - b. not the subject of debate between the His followers and critics,
 - c. not some theological position, but the **Person of Jesus** –
 - d. to look Him in the eyes and see there all the love and compassion that Jesus had for him and his tormented son,
 - e. and to realize that there was power *there, in Jesus*, to set him free.
17. In that moment, looking in to those eyes, hearing his son writhing on the ground in agony, the man realized that Jesus was the answer to all of it – and he said,

Mark 9:24 • “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

- a. this is a sign he'd come to a **true faith**,
 - b. because he realized all too well the foolishness of not trusting *even more*.
18. Based on this expression of genuine faith, Jesus healed the boy.

18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour.

19. Mark tells us when the demon fled, it gave the boy one last good thrashing!
- a. this was a sign this was one especially hateful & powerful demon.
 - b. it resisted even Christ to the very end, not cowering as some of the other demons did in His presence, but vicious and violent and leaving only reluctantly.
 - c. so violent was the departure, when it was over the boy looked dead.
 - d. but Jesus lifted Him up and restored him to his father.

C. Vs. 19-21

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰ **So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.**

1. When it was all over, the disciples came and asked why they'd been unable to affect the deliverance.
2. Jesus laid the problem at the weakness of their faith.
3. In v. 20 we read Jesus said, “Because of your unbelief.”
 - a. He used an interesting word here for unbelief
 - b. literally it's '*little faith*'; but by 'little,' He didn't mean quantity but quality.
 - c. *weak* would be better.
4. They'd asked why they'd failed at delivering the boy, and Jesus said it was because their faith was weak & ineffectual!
5. Then He draws a contrast – He says, “Listen, while *your* faith is weak, if you have even the *tiniest* amount of the *right kind of faith*, you can do what seems impossible!”
 - a. both the mustard seed and a mountain were idioms to the Jews of that day.

- b. a mustard seed meant something *really small*, while a mountain referred to something that was stable an *immovable*.
- 6. Jesus' point was clear – it's not how *much* faith you have, but that you have faith in something worthy of faith.
 - a. it's not how much faith you have but what your faith is *in* that matters.
 - b. I can have a huge amount of faith that I can fly and go up onto the top of this building and jump – but I'm not going to go very far before gravity takes over and I make intimate contact with the ground.
 - c. on the other hand, I can have just enough faith to take a few steps from the terminal at LAX into the jet way, down the ramp and into the plane.
 - d. because of the nature of the plane, I'm going to arrive safely wherever it's going.
- 7. The problem with the disciples, even though they *were* disciples, though they'd followed Jesus and seen countless miracles – **THEIR FAITH HAD GROWN STALE**.
 - a. following Him and seeing the miraculous had become *routine*.
 - b. there'd been a subtle shift in their hearts away from the intimacy of personal contact with the Lord to being a *disciple as a 'job.'*
 - c. being a disciple had become an occupation – something they *did* --
 - d. rather than seeing it as something they *were*, and that far more important than the *doing* was the *being*.
- 8. Let me illustrate the difference; I'm a husband. I have a wife.
 - a. I can do the things a husband does, and do them really well! Provide, protect, fix stuff, listen, care, serve, lead.
 - b. and quite frankly, I can do all of that without ever really *giving myself* to my wife, or opening up to allow herself to give herself to me.
 - c. this happens in many marriages – after many years a husband and wife settle into a comfortable routine of *doing the marriage thing*, but they stop sharing their hearts and lives.
 - d. a subtle distance creeps in between them & before they know it, the love, the attraction, *the sense of oneness* is all but gone.
 - e. my wife doesn't just want me to *do the husband stuff* – she wants me!
- 9. Jesus doesn't just want us just to do the disciples stuff, He wants us!
- 10. And if He truly has us, the disciple stuff will be done!
- 11. This is the place the disciples had slipped to in Matthew 17 and why they couldn't deliver the boy – their faith was weak & ineffectual because they'd drifted away from the place of intimate connection to the Lord.
- 12. And that's why Jesus says in v. 21 –

21 However, this kind [meaning this kind of demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”

[Aside: In some modern versions, v. 21 not there. We'll see why on Wednesday evening. For now, know that it ought to be in the text.]

D. Prayer & Fasting

1. In Eph. 6 the Apostle Paul tells us that we are locked in a spiritual contest against demonic forces that are highly organized and structured with varying

- levels of authority and power.
2. Overcoming some of the more powerful demons will require a greater level of spiritual depth, insight, and discipline – and these are only developed through prayer & fasting.
 3. The disciples were perplexed on why they had no power to deliver this young boy because in ch. 10 Jesus had sent them out and empowered them to heal and cast out demons.
 4. They'd come back with incredible reports of the miracles they'd worked and the exorcisms they'd effected.
 5. So what went wrong here?
 6. The problem was they were depending on their *previous* commissioning and empowering by Jesus, as though some kind of perpetual mantle of power had been placed on them. It hadn't!
 7. Their spiritual authority & power was only as effective as their present union to Christ and sense of dependence on God.
 - a. James 4:7-8 -

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.
 - b. when we draw near to God, the devil runs like a scared rabbit!
 8. Prayer, as we've seen again & again, is a renewal of our *dependence* of God.
 9. Being continually in prayer is where we need to be if we're going to be effective against all spiritual foes because we do not overcome them in our own authority but in His.
 10. The greater our sense of dependence on God, the greater our spiritual authority and power.
 11. But what role does fasting play? Why does Jesus connect abstaining from food as necessary to finding victory over demonic strongholds?
 12. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that sharpens our focus on our being a spiritual being.
 13. Let me use another illustration; If you want to get physically strong, what do you have to do?
 - a. you have to watch your Diet & Exercise!
 - b. you must have the right input through nutrition and the right output in terms of physical exercise.
 - c. *both things mean applying some discipline*, making some changes to the normal course of what's pleasurable, to invest some time and effort in pursuing what's hard, maybe even difficult.
 - d. but by consistency in these disciplines, you see real changes!
 - e. the result is the strength you long for.
 14. What's true *physically* applies *spiritually*. If you would grow spiritually strong, it's not going to happen by taking the easy route – you must invest in some spiritual disciplines – prayer and fasting.
 15. Fasting is a spiritual exercise – it's the exercise of your spirit *over* the natural desire of the flesh to want to eat.
 - a. if you want your bicep to get stronger, when you're doing curls and the muscle says, "Stop, that's enough" you have to say "No, 3 more!"
 - b. by saying to your belly when it says, "Feed me!" - "No! 3 more hours or 3

- more days” it results in your spirit being strengthened.
16. When fasting is incorporated into our lives, it gives us the opportunity to see just how much of an influence our bodies place on us and how strong its demands really are.
 17. You may not think you have much problem with your flesh, okay – try fasting for 3 days and get back to me.
 18. By saying “No” for a time to the belly and mouth, it exercises the spirit which then gets stronger.
 - a. we begin to look at the world and life from more of a spiritual than physical perspective.
 - b. we find our spiritual senses being sharpened.
 - c. and we discover that it becomes far more easy to *resist* the sins of the flesh because we’re learning how to say “No” to it.
 19. Many people think fasting is a way to earn brownie-points with God.
 - a. every meal they skip is one more coin in the heavenly bank of merit.
 - b. every hunger pain is one more twist on God’s arm that will result in Him granting them some favor.
 20. But fasting is not something we do to impress God or use to influence Him to do something for us; it’s not divine arm-twisting.
 21. Fasting is a practice that helps strengthen our spirit and make us more spiritually-minded.
 22. It brings greater discipline to our flesh, to our bodies, and allows us to gain greater self-control, especially over our appetites & the lusts of our senses.
 23. In Galatians 5:17 Paul made it clear that the flesh and the spirit are at odds with each other.
 24. In Mat 26:41 Jesus said that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak – meaning weak in choosing what is right.
 - a. our spirit, indwelt as it is by the Spirit of Christ wants to do the good,
 - b. but the flesh, that thing we’re far more used to choosing in, by, & for, well - it wants what it wants and that’s *not* the same thing as the spirit.
 - c. the spirit wants what’s right, but the flesh does not possess the will to chose it,
 - d. and if we always let the flesh have its way, the spirit will diminish and weaken for lack of exercise & nourishment.
 25. Fasting is a form of spiritual exercise that sees the spirit rise to dominance over the flesh.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *The Need For Power*

1. The fact of the matter is, in our journey through life, in our spiritual pilgrimage, we’re going to face some obstacles that, like mountains, seem impossible to overcome.
2. Where the disciples failed that day with the demon-possessed boy was that they were trusting in their *label* as *disciples* as the *basis of their authority*.
3. That wasn’t going to cut it. Reputation, labels, names, and even a glorious past of mighty & miraculous works for the Lord aren’t going to help us when it

comes to the need that's before us today.

4. The only thing that matters is this – are you in Christ **RIGHT NOW?**
5. Is your life right now characterized by prayer, by daily dependence on God?
6. Is there spiritual discipline & strength in your life – or are you spiritually weak & flabby?
7. When push comes to shove – which wins out – your flesh or your spirit?
8. One way you can answer that is by asking yourself whether or not you *will* fast.
9. Are you willing to say “No!” to food because developing yourself *spiritually* is a higher priority than feeding your flesh?

B. Who's It For?

1. About 7 years ago a devastating truth dropped like a bomb on my world – I'm getting old! The signs were becoming clear;
 - a. baldness, hair growing faster in my nose and ears than on the top of my head
 - b. gray hairs, wrinkles, and this thing, a tire-shaped tumor around my waist!
 - c. I was kinda' depressed about it for a couple years, but lacked the discipline to make any real changes in either diet or exercise.
2. Then 4 years ago, I realized that if I didn't do something, I'd get to the age where it would be too late – so I began making some changes in my diet & started working out.
3. I kept up a pretty rigorous program. Lost a lot of weight and got into really good shape.
4. It was a lot of work & discipline – but the benefits were fantastic!
5. Now, I need to say this – One of the main reasons for getting in shape was my wife.
 - a. I love her & want the best for her, and to be frank, I was not giving her my best in the condition I was in.
 - b. all the work was aimed at providing her a lean, mean 'husband machine!'
6. As much as I love my wife, I love Jesus even more.
7. If I would go to all that effort and work for her, *how much more* ought I be willing to invest the effort & discipline in presenting myself to Him as a spiritually fit & strong servant?
8. Fasting will not make Jesus love me any more than He already does.
9. It won't earn me special favors. But it *will* help shape me into a more effective servant of God. And that's what I want to be.
10. I suspect it's what you want to be too.

FLYER on fasting