

Spiritual growth 17 - A Faith that Works

1. How faith does *not* work.

In Matthew 17 there is a wonderful passage that has been an encouragement to many people that turns faith into hope. As people face the challenges of life and come to the point where things look hopeless, they have often been challenged to turn to God in faith. There *is* a problem with this, of course. They should never have waited until things seem so hopeless. Nevertheless, people are blessed when they learn to turn to God in faith. In Matthew 17 Jesus gives us assurance of what can be accomplished by faith. There is a man who brought his demon possessed son to the apostles, but they had not been able to get anywhere with him.

Matt 17:17-21 Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

Jesus knew their hearts. Mark later reveals that the man had come with his doubts because he emphasized "*if* thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us." It is at that point that Jesus explained that "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." It is as if Jesus is saying, "What do you mean *if*? Of course I can do it. There is no *if* about it. The question is if *you* can believe." The man responded, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

18And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

19Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?

20And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

21Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Having faith as a grain of a mustard seed does mean that you will be successful in any endeavor that you conjure up. It *does* mean that you will have success in your relationship and service to the Lord. This does not necessarily mean that you will have success in all of your *perceived* and *anticipated* objectives. God's workings are mysterious to us. His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts.

Isa 55:8-9 For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Having faith as a grain of a mustard seed is one of the difficult passages in the Bible. The great promise we have is that if only we had faith as a grain of mustard seed, we could move mountains. This is so very true in the right context, but it is very easy to take *out* of context. It certainly has been abused by ministries that major in sensationalism and end up only creating false hope. If you criticize them, they will turn this around to accuse you of not having faith and of blasphemy, not respecting God and His power. All the while they take the name of the Lord in vain by ascribing to him exaggerated claims of what He will do.

The most common understanding about this passage is that people think that, if their faith was only the right kind of faith, it would be so strong that all they would need is a small amount the size of a mustard seed. Many believers have been disillusioned because they don't seem to be able to muster up the right kind of faith to get what they want in life. Some people think that if they pray and are not healed then the problem is with them and their faith. Whenever we consider this problem, we have only to look to the Apostle Paul to see that we do not manipulate God by our faith.

2Cor 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

If there was anyone who had more faith than the average person, it had to be Paul. So much of the book of Acts records his life of faith. And yet, it was God's will that after asking the Lord for the third time, God revealed that it was His will that Paul carry this burden for God's glory.

Why people misunderstand Matthew 17 is because they misread the passage. Jesus did not say that we need to have faith *the size* of a grain of mustard seed but *as* a mustard seed. To understand what He's saying, we need to consider this in the light of a parable where Jesus used the mustard seed figure of speech.

Mark 4:30-32 And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? 31 *It is* like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:

32 But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.

When considering the mustard seed, we need the complete understanding of the figure of speech.

As a grain of mustard seed does not refer to the *size* of a grain.

Having a faith that works does not mean that you have the ability to manipulate God, or have the ability to have mind over matter, or that by your hoping for something strongly enough you will think it into happening. *As a grain of mustard seed* takes into account the whole nature and life cycle of the seed. Our faith, like a mustard seed in the Kingdom, is a growing faith as we grow in dependence on the Lord. The whole context of the passage is about *increasing* faith. The man believed and asked for help to grow in faith. The disciples needed a more mature faith that comes from fasting and prayer. A mustard seed starts off small and yet will grow into a shrub or tree as large as 30 ft so that birds can lodge in it. The idea is that as faith grows great things will be accomplished.

An immature understanding of faith is that all someone has to do is focus the strength of their attention on a problem in order to take care of it. As we become older and more experienced in the Lord, our faith becomes more mature. We begin to learn several things about faith. Our understanding of the nature of faith begins to grow.

We don't exercise faith merely to feed our lust.

Jas 4:1-3 From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members?

2 Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts.

We have to ask things according to God's will.

1John 5:14 And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:

In order to have faith grow, we have to grow in our understanding of God's nature which will help give us discernment to be able to recognize His will. God will not do anything that is contrary to His nature and His will. We must be Kingdom minded, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We continue to grow as we gain experience in life.

Matt 6:26-34 Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

27Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

29And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, *shall he* not much more *clothe* you, O ye of little faith?

31Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

34Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof.

We continue to grow as we gain experience in life.

Rom 5:1-5 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

2By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

3And not only *so*, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

4And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

5And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

The spiritually mature faith understands the benefit and blessing of what we don't receive. The spiritually mature faith also understands the benefit and blessing of working hard to grow in knowledge of God and disciplining our soul. As we grow in our faith in God He begins to work in us and through us. We leave these things to God and put our faith in Him and then He works in us.

Phil 1:3-6 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,

4Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy,

5For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;

6Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ:

2. How faith and works are in harmony.

The next challenge to understanding faith is understanding the relationship of faith and works. We know that salvation is not based on our good works.

Eph 2:8-9 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:

9Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Rom 4:4-5 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.

5But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

There are two words in Greek that are translated *believe*. One of them is used in reference to the kind of faith that Satan has.

Jas 2:19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

The other is often used to describe the kind of faith that gives us eternal life and also sanctification. It is the faith that produces action.

Rom 10:13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

It will produce action to call upon the name of the Lord to be saved, and also

produce the kind of action that matches our new nature.

James 2:12-26 So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.

13For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

14What *doth it* profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

15If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be *ye* warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what *doth it* profit?

17Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. **Works are the manifestation of our faith.**

19Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

20But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? **Here, to justify works means that he had works that proved his faith.**

22Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? **Faith being made perfect means that faith achieved its natural conclusion**

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26For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Our actions reveal the *nature* of our faith. There are some things that I feel somewhat compelled to do. If I see someone struggling, my mind quickly starts to try to find a solution. Not too long ago I had to re-park my car down the street. As I looked for a parking space, I saw a wedding party making its way into City Hall. I felt so sorry for a mature lady whose shoe all of a sudden fell apart as she was walking. I thought of how I had a can of spray glue that might act as contact cement long enough, hopefully, for her to get through the ceremony. I got the car parked, moved as quickly as I could to get home and get the can of glue, and made my way to the wedding party. It turns out that she was the bride. You can imagine her surprise as this stranger appeared with a kind of glue that might save the day. I cautioned

her to be careful because I did not know if the glue would definitely work, and left. I hope a fond memory was added to their special day. What is the message of this story? It is not that you should carry around a can of spray glue. Each of us have things that we just can't seem to help doing. It might be food preparation for guests. It might be cleaning the mess someone left behind in a store. It might be blessing children. It might be a compassion for poor little animals. These things are part of our personality.

When it comes to our spiritual nature, there are some things that our *new* nature should compel in us.

Ps 42:1-4 As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.

2My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?

3My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where *is* thy God?

4When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday.

If we are not compelled in our spirit to serve God, to know God, and to seek after God, then there is something wrong with that spirit! It would be a terrible thing to go through life with a kind of faith that Satan has knowing that God exists but never taking action to call upon him as Savior and then serve him. The new life in us from God ought to manifest itself.

Certainly God looks on the heart, all we have is the outer appearance to behold.

1 Sam 16:7 But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

We can tell false prophets by their works.

Matt 7:15-20 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

¹⁶Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

¹⁷Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

¹⁸A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt

tree bring forth good fruit.

¹⁹Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

²⁰Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

We can tell a Godly woman by her works.

Prov 31:31 Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

We can get a clue about our leaders by their works.

Heb 13:7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

3. How faith *does* work.

Remember: emotion, intellect, and volition. Our intellect informs our emotion. By our intellect we discover that God is real and that we have offended Him. By our emotion we sorrow over our sin and want to be right with God. By our volition we voluntarily surrender our heart and mind to Christ and call on Him to be our Savior. Our faith should make a difference!

Although in general sanctification is applied to many areas of our salvation, I am going to examine it in one particular area. We usually speak of sanctification in particular with respect to how we live our lives. Sanctification, is how we walk in the world. We need to possess our vessel (this body) in honor.

1Thess 4:3-7 For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:

4That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour;

5Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God:

6That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified.

7For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.

2Tim 2:19-26 Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

20But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of

earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.

21If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, *and* prepared unto every good work.

22Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

23But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

24And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient,

25In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

26And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

We do not now walk by sight, but by faith. We are purchased by God through the blood of Christ and we are a slave to Him.

Gal 2:20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Eph 2:8-10 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:

9Not of works, lest any man should boast.

10For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

We are His workmanship. Our life is a reflection of the kind of God we serve. Does our speech, our interests, our activities reflect the kind of job Jesus did on us? How do we spend our time and money? If you have not given your life to Christ and received Him as your Savior then you need to do this and enter into this blessed life.

1. How faith does not work. Matt 17:17-21, Isa 55:8-9, 2Cor 12:7-10, Mark 4:30-32, Jas 4:1-3, 1John 5:14, Matt 6:26-34, Rom 5:1-5, Phil 1:3-6
2. How faith and works are in harmony. Eph 2:8-9, Rom 4:4-5, Jas 2:19, Rom 10:13, James 2:12-26, Ps 42:1-4
3. How faith does work. 1Thess 4:3-7, 2Tim 2:19-26, Gal 2:20, Eph 2:8-10