

# Matthew 17:14-21

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 19 July 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 00 ] Talk about a mountaintop experience.

They don't get more mountaintop than the experience of Jesus and the disciples on Mount Hermon. Certainly that's where we imagine or mostly we reckon the experience was located as it's described for us there in chapter 17 of Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus, His face shining like the sun, and Peter, James, and John who had accompanied up the mountain glowing in the reflected glory.

It's little wonder that as we've read, Peter wanted to hang about on the summit. Coming back down the mountain into the real world, if we want to call it that, was far from appealing to Peter.

How much better to stay up on the mountain. And though we're not told, I don't think it's unfair or unreasonable to imagine that even Jesus experienced just a measure of reluctance at the prospect of heading down the mountain into the real world and all that awaited Him in the real world.

[ 1 : 35 ] Of course, as we were thinking about last Sunday morning, this experience was very much in the context of Jesus not only being aware of, but communicating to His disciples that what was ahead of Him, not that far ahead, was His own death.

But even before His death, there were challenging experiences to be faced at the foot of the mountain. How much better, how much easier, how much more pleasant, how much more comfortable to remain up on the mountain.

But come down they must. And what do they find? What does Jesus find when He comes down from the mountain?

He finds trouble, trouble, nothing but trouble. I want us to walk through this passage from verse 14 through to verse 21.

To walk through it and to discover, to identify the sad and the sobering realities that Jesus was confronted by. And then try and identify the answer that is to be found to the sad and sobering realities.

[ 2 : 52 ] I think that we'll discover that what Jesus finds, what He found there in Galilee a couple of thousand years ago, is not so different to what He would find if He came down to Aberdeen today.

And certainly the answer that is required is the same today as it was then. Well, let's think first of all of what it is that Jesus is confronted by as He comes down the mountain.

Verse 14 of Matthew 17, When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before Him. 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. The contrast is so stunning between what had been experienced on the mountaintop and now the sad, the crude, the horrifying reality of the real world.

This poor boy suffering greatly. This father filled with anguish as he witnesses his son suffer so greatly.

[ 4 : 06 ] Jesus is confronted by suffering that is real, that is intense, that is raw, that is tragic. The crowd awaits Jesus.

But out of the crowd, a crowd that no doubt represented all manner of suffering, out of the crowd this one man stands out. This is a man, I'm sure, a family suffering terribly.

His son is suffering and the father suffers with him. The nature of the son's condition generates some discussion, some debate. In the version of the Bible that we're using, the father explains that he has seizures.

There in verse 15, he has seizures and is suffering greatly. Other modern translations identify the condition with a known medical condition.

The translation is he is an epileptic. Now, just to, I don't know if complicate things further, if that's the right way to describe it, but Jesus makes clear that the son's condition is due to the activity of a demon.

[ 5 : 17 ] In verse 18, Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the boy and he was healed from that moment. So, there was a physical manifestation that in some ways approximated to an identifiable medical condition, but we have to recognize it's Jesus himself who makes it clear that there is to this case, to this boy's condition, an element that is demonic.

As is described for us in our passage, the visible manifestation of his condition involved the boy falling into the fire or water.

And the implication seems to be that this is not simply the random outcome of his seizures, but that there is a malevolent intention to harm him.

It's not simply that he has a seizure and, well, that's unlucky, the fire happened to be there or the water happened to be there. There seems to be an intention there to harm the boy.

So, this is very dark. This is very evil, what Jesus is being confronted with, with regard to this boy.

[ 6 : 33 ] Now, of course, today there are many who are very skeptical at the very notion of demonic activity, and so will try to rationalize the account and argue that it was just a physical condition like epilepsy, but the observers of the day, without the benefits of modern science and understanding, describe it in this very crude and primitive way.

But we don't share those ways of approaching the biblical text. We don't need to choose between the boy's condition being physical, there clearly were physical manifestations, and it being demonic in some way.

It may well have been both. The bottom line is what is said by the father, and on this we can focus our attention, the boy was suffering greatly. He approaches Jesus.

He describes the problem. My son is suffering greatly. His son was suffering greatly. Try and place yourself in the shoes of this father.

Try and place yourself in the shoes of this father as he shadows his son. You know, we've been told what the manifestations of this ill were, that he had seizures that were dangerous for him.

[ 8 : 02 ] They would throw him into the fire or into the water. It's remarkable that the boy is still alive, and that in itself is testimony to the father's care. The father shadows this boy, so that whenever the seizures take place, he is there to protect him, to pull him out of the water, to pull him from the fire.

His survival is testimony enough to the father's care and concern. Just place yourself in the shoes of this father as his life revolves around protecting this son who is so terribly suffering.

Very difficult to even imagine, to place ourselves there, to imagine his anguish, his pain, his sense of desperation.

But do we need to cast our gaze back to the first century to witness suffering of that kind? Is it not true that in Aberdeen today there are many who suffer to similar degrees of intensity?

The circumstances may be different. The cause may be different, but who know very well what it is to suffer greatly. Fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, families struck by tragedy of one kind or another, visited by pain and suffering, suffering that is intense and tragic.

[ 9 : 34 ] Well, Jesus, when he came down the mountain, the first thing that he is confronted with is this picture, this reality of terrible suffering.

But just to compound that, Jesus is confronted by a situation that appears hopeless. Notice what the text goes on to say in verse 16 of Matthew chapter 17.

I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. That's on page 984 is the passage that we're looking at. Matthew 17 verse 16.

The father continues to explain the circumstances and he says to Jesus, look, I brought my son to your disciples, but they could not heal him. In Luke's gospel, it says that the father begged Jesus' disciples.

He begged them, please do something for my son. Look how he suffers. He suffers something. And nothing. They could do nothing. There was no answer for this boy.

[ 10 : 40 ] Even the disciples of Jesus who had, by this stage, gathered quite a reputation for healing and casting out demons. We'll come to that in a moment. But for this boy, nothing could be done.

The situation appears to be hopeless. And yet the father continues to fight on for his son. He had heard, no doubt, of this man, Jesus, and of his disciples who heal the sick and cast out demons. And so he seeks them out. The disciples, they can't help. They try, but they can't help. But even then, the man continues.

He doesn't give up. But before we move on to that part of the story, let's just pause for a moment. Pause for a moment and think about the disciples and think about this man approaching the disciples of Jesus for help.

Just, it's almost going away at a tangent, just for a moment to draw out something that is maybe sobering for us. You see, we read this passage and we think, well, the disciples don't come out of this very well, do they?

[ 11 : 53 ] They don't come out of this with glory. They failed. They could do nothing for the boy. And yet, where does a man who is suffering, a man in need, to whom did he turn for help?

They couldn't help him. He received help in due course, but the disciples couldn't help him. But to whom do they turn or to whom does the man turn? He turns to the disciples of Jesus.

He says, they're the ones to go to. And I stress that because while we look on in judgment and say, well, they did very badly, what about us? The suffering of Aberdeen.

Do they even think of turning to the disciples of Jesus? Do they say, I know where I can go. I know who can help me, the disciples of Jesus. That's who I should go to. Or are we in a position in a way, a lot more lamentable than the disciples of Jesus described here and that the people don't even come.

It wouldn't even cross their mind to think, well, the disciples of Jesus, they're the ones to turn to. But let's move on. Jesus confronted by terrible suffering, confronted by a situation that appears to be hopeless, but confronted also by unbelief.

[ 13 : 13 ] in what follows in the passage. This really is the main focus of what we're told. And confronted by unbelief at two levels.

He's confronted by unbelief of what he describes as a generation, an unbelieving and perverse generation, but also he's confronted more particularly by the unbelief of the disciples.

And we want to think about both of these demonstrations, if you wish, of unbelief. But even before we do that, it is striking that what appears to distress Jesus most of all, above and beyond the suffering, above and beyond the hopelessness that he's confronted with, what distresses him most is the unbelief that he discovers.

And that, when we think about it, it ought not to surprise us because it's the unbelief that is the cause of the symptoms. The suffering and the hopelessness are symptoms of a deeper cause and the deeper cause is unbelief.

Not surprising then that this is what Jesus focuses in on. Well, let's think of these two demonstrations of unbelief. The unbelief of a generation. Verse 17, O unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied, How long shall I stay with you?

[ 14 : 41 ] How long shall I put up with you? Jesus sees before him a crowd. We've been told that a crowd were gathered there at the foot of the mountain awaiting his descent from the mountain.

He sees the crowd and of course that crowd represented a generation. a generation that did not believe in Jesus.

Before him stood a generation who would not, who could not see Jesus for who he was. The promised Messiah, their God-sent Savior. They did not believe in him for who he was.

The evidence was before them but they would not believe and Jesus is grieved. He's distressed by their unbelief. There's almost a sense of exasperation.

How long? How long? And again, as we fast forward 2,000 years to today, is our generation the generation that we are part of, not a generation that we stand apart from and look down on on judgment, but as a generation that we are part of, is our generation so different?

[ 15 : 54 ] Are we not part also of an unbelieving and perverse generation? But we're particularly interested in the unbelief that Jesus identifies that belongs to the disciples.

In verse 20, what happens is, of course, we've read the account. Jesus, having expressed his exasperation at the unbelief of the generation, he then proceeds to heal the boy and to return him to his father.

And it's a beautiful scene that is painted. But the disciples are confused because, you see, they hadn't been able to do anything for the boy and they don't know why that was and they're looking

for answers and they ask Jesus.

That's good. Why couldn't we drive it out, is their question there in verse 19. And Jesus gives them an answer. He replied, verse 20, because you have so little faith.

So here Jesus is focusing in on unbelief, but particularly the unbelief of his disciples. In some ways, more distressing, more inexcusable than the unbelief of the generation.

[17:10] And Jesus states the matter simply, you have so little faith. And this unbelief was prejudicial to the disciples themselves. It handicapped them in their ministry.

And in some measure, it reflected badly on their master. They were, after all, the disciples of Jesus who, everybody had seen, were incapable of relieving the great suffering of the boy and his father.

I wonder, as we think of ourselves, as Jesus sees our generation, but more particularly as he surveys us, his disciples, gathered here this morning, what is it that he's confronted by?

Is he also confronted by, in great measure, in some measure, is he confronted by unbelief? Jesus, as he comes down the mountain, he's confronted by suffering, he's confronted by hopelessness, he's confronted by unbelief.

Is there an answer? And what is the answer? Well, the answer is to be found in the passage. The answer is the powerful love of God.

[18:20] The powerful love of God that is demonstrated by Jesus in the healing of the boy, but also the powerful love of God that the disciples must believe in.

Precisely what they weren't doing, hence their failure. So the powerful love of God demonstrated by Jesus. We read what it says in the passage, bring the boy here to me.

Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the boy and he was healed from that moment. The father, even in the face of the failure of the disciples, he doesn't give in, he doesn't return home, he insists, well, I'll wait for Jesus.

If the disciples can't help me, well, perhaps the master can. And he cries out for mercy and Jesus grants him mercy. He grants him the healing that he so longs for.

He feels, he hears the father's pain. He calls for the suffering son. He delivers and heals the boy and he hands the boy back restored to his father.

[19:32] in all of this, in all of this, demonstrating the powerful love of God. Power and love combined. Both are necessary and both are present.

It is love that moved Jesus in power that is exercised, that heals the boy. The whole episode is marked by the sovereign power and authority of Jesus.

He rebukes the demon and we hear no more of him. No indication of even a futile attempt to resist the word of command. Jesus speaks and the demon is gone.

The boy is healed from that moment. So, in the miracle, we have a demonstration of the answer to this sad reality of human suffering represented by this boy.

But is that where we end? Do we end by saying, well, isn't it wonderful what Jesus can do? Isn't it wonderful what Jesus can do and let's just hope he carries on doing that kind of thing here and now?

[20:45] Are we to conclude that our role is to passively wait for Jesus to act in power? How will he do that? Jesus, in the eternal plan of salvation, came into this world.

He fulfilled his saving work, handing himself over to death on Calvary's tree. He rose again from the grave. He ascended on high. He seated at the right hand of the Father, governing the universe.

But that is what he is. He's not here healing people as he was in his incarnate state here on earth. So how will this power, this love, be demonstrated today?

Well, it will be demonstrated by Jesus' disciples. Jesus sees the failure of the disciples as an opportunity to challenge his disciples on this matter of their unbelief, of their lack of faith.

You see, if they prove so inept when he heads up the mountain for a few hours, what will matters be like when he heads to heaven? Well, let's explore this failure of the disciples explained by Jesus as due to their lack of faith.

[22:04] And as we do, try and discover not only the problem, but the solution. And we can do this by reconstructing the chain of events as best we can.

Let's try and do this rather fleetingly. Let's go back to Matthew chapter 10 and verse 1. Matthew chapter 10. You need to just flick back four or five pages in your Bibles.

Matthew chapter 10, verse 1, And notice what it says. He, Jesus, called his twelve disciples. So the very same disciples who we discover were incapable of providing an answer to this poor man and

his son.

And what do we read here? Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. The disciples, let's be clear, were equipped for the task at hand.

They were commissioned and equipped to deal with this kind of stuff. They had been equipped. They had been granted the authority and the power to act.

[ 23 : 15 ] Did they ever have any success? Was it a case that Jesus granted them this commission? He granted them this power, but actually they never exercised it with any success?

Well, let's turn to a passage that will answer that question. Let's turn to Mark's gospel in chapter 6. We just need to look at a couple of passages in addition to our text to get this chain of events in our minds.

Chapter 6 of Mark's gospel. This tells us in a way that the outcome of this sending out of the twelve, notice the little passage there is entitled Jesus sends out the twelve.

The same as in Matthew. The only difference is that Mark gives us a brief summary of what happened following this commission. Verse 12, they, the disciples, went out and preached that people should repent.

They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. So it's very clear, let there be no doubt, that these disciples had been busy driving out demons and healing the sick in the weeks that had proceeded.

[ 24 : 24 ] They had the power. The power had been granted. They drove out many demons. But let me just ask you to think. Try and place yourself in the shoes of the disciples the first time they went solo.

When they were sent out, Jesus wasn't with them. They'd been commissioned. They'd been given the task, go and drive out demons and heal the sick. And off they went, the twelve. And the first time they encounter one so oppressed oppressed like this boy.

I wonder what it was like. Well, I can tell you one thing. They were trusting in God. They were praying, God, help us. Help us to help this boy.

Help this man. Help this one who is sick and suffering. And as they trusted in God and as they rested in God, so they discovered that as they anointed with oil and as they drove out demons, the demons were driven out and the sick were healed.

As they rested in God, as they trusted in God, amazing things happened. But I wonder what happened. And there's an element of speculation here.

[ 25 : 31 ] But I think legitimate speculation. I wonder what happened. As the days went by, as they healed more and more, as they drove out more and more demons, as it became almost commonplace, did they begin to slowly and imperceptibly shift their trust from God to themselves?

They knew what to do. They knew the words to say. They knew the steps to take. They were experienced, even skilled practitioners. In fact, people even began to seek them out.

And they didn't disappoint. Their ministry, increasingly, and no doubt imperceptibly, to themselves, and certainly to those round about them, became detached from God and from trust in God.

They were trusting more and more in themselves. And it could only ultimately end in tears and failures. And it did. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.

They had been commissioned for that task. They had been equipped for that task. But they failed. They failed because they were no longer trusting in God as they had been when they were first sent out.

[ 26 : 49 ] Or so is the thesis that I'm suggesting to you. They could not heal him because of their little faith. This suggested backdrop to their failure helps us to understand what Jesus means by little faith.

It's not about quantity, as the language might suggest. It's more fundamental than that. It's about the object of their faith. It's about who the disciples are trusting in.

The problem is that they were now trusting in themselves rather than trusting in God. That the issue is not quantity or magnitude of faith is the very point that Jesus makes when he speaks of the mustard seed.

He says to them, even if your faith was as small as a mustard seed, it would have been more than enough for you to drive out that demon. Even tiny faith is enough if it is faith in God, if it is faith that rests in God.

But you can have huge faith in yourself and it will do nothing. It's not the quantity of their faith, it's the object of their faith that is the crucial and the key matter that Jesus is seeking to help them to understand.

[ 28 : 08 ] Faith in God, even if it's as small as a mustard seed, can move mountains. Such faith can drive out demons. Such faith can do the impossible.

Why? Because the power of such faith is not to be found in faith itself, but in the God upon whom such faith rests. When Jesus says, nothing will be impossible for you, a statement that many have found difficult to digest and understand, all he is really saying is nothing is impossible for God. And given that nothing is impossible for God, if God sends you out to do something, however difficult it may appear, it's not impossible for you because you're resting in God and you're working and you're serving in His strength and in His strength nothing is impossible for you.

The problem is not the quantity of their faith, but the one in whom their faith rests. Now as I was reflecting, and we'll draw things to a close, as I was reflecting on the disciples' fruitless ministry, on this occasion, it had not always been so, they had driven out many demons, but on this occasion, as I was reflecting on their failure, it struck me as a sobering but necessary task for all of us who are disciples of Jesus to examine the nature of our service.

Are we trusting in God as we serve God? As I preach, is my trust in God or in 20 years doing this kind of thing and well, you know, get a passage, you know, get an outline, send it out there?

[ 29 : 53 ] Who am I trusting in? As you listen, who are you trusting in? Are you trusting in all your accumulated knowledge of the Bible and your ability to process what is said and say, oh yeah, that makes sense or I don't agree with that?

Or are you trusting in God as the one who will speak to you through His Word? As you teach Sunday school, as you serve on the Kreschrota, as you help out at Foodbank, who are you trusting in?

As you seek to serve God as a father, as a son, as a husband, as a wife, as you seek to live as a Christian among unbelieving colleagues at work, who are you trusting in to do that?

Are you trusting in yourself or are you trusting in God? You see, service rendered in our own strength will often not look so different to service rendered in God's strength.

And that's what makes it difficult. Think about the disciples. When the disciples were confronted with this demon-possessed boy, what they did, you see, they attempted to drive out the demon.

[ 31 : 00 ] And what they did, I'm sure, looked exactly the same as what they had done when they had success. Somebody observing it would have said they did exactly the same things.

They said the same words. They followed the same steps. But yesterday it worked. And today it doesn't work. Or last month or whatever time had elapsed. You see, that's what makes things difficult.

Our service rendered in our own strength can look exactly the same. And yet, if it is in our own strength, there will be no spiritual profit.

There will be no ultimate gain from it. The impact is so very different. Now, in our service for God, it can be more difficult to measure the spiritual impact of what we do.

In the case of the disciples, it was so brutally clear. They simply were incapable of helping the boy before them. In our service, it's not so easy sometimes to know if there is spiritual profit or impact of our service.

[ 32 : 09 ] and so that can mask our fruitlessness and our unbelief, our little faith, or rather, our misplaced faith as we begin to rest in ourselves.

I've done this so long. I've taught Sunday school for so many years. I know what to do. I've spoken to people about Jesus. I've done it many times. I know the words to say. And we're doing the same things.

It seems to be just the same, but it's no longer resting in God, trusting in God. It's now trusting in ourselves. How can we know if we are trusting in ourselves or trusting in God?

Well, one measure, not the only measure, but I would wager as good a measure as you'll get, is prayer. If we are serving without prayer, then that is a pretty good measure that we have succumbed to trusting in ourselves.

I don't need to pray. I don't need to ask God's help. I know what I'm doing. I've done it so often, and I can carry on doing it. It looks exactly the same. And if there's no prayer accompanying our service, accompanying our lives, then that surely is an indication that we have made the mistake that it

would seem the disciples had made.

[ 33 : 29 ] Having trusted in God, they were now trusting in themselves. Well, in the real world of Galilee, at the foot of the mountain were suffering and hopelessness.

And it's what you find everywhere in the real world. The only ultimate answer is the powerful love of God to redeem and restore. We are called to live lives as disciples of Jesus, constrained by that love and marked by that power.

And we can live such lives. Nothing is impossible for us. But we can only in the measure that our trust is in God.

When we trust in Him, mountains start to move. And many are amazed at the majesty and greatness of God.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning and we come confessing our unbelief. We can so identify with the disciples.

[ 34 : 36 ] Disciples who it would seem endeavored to do a good thing to help this boy, to help this poor father. They had good intentions.

They wanted the best. But they failed. And they failed because they were trusting in their own strength, in their own capacity, in their own experience, in their own track record.

And they had ceased to put their trust in you. We identify with them because we know that that is what we so often do. And we pray that by your Spirit you would convict us and persuade us and bring us back to that place where we trust in you.

acknowledging that in any other place our service will be fruitless and will have no eternal consequence.

Help us then, we pray. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.