

# Matthew

A Careful Study of Matthew

May 11, 2025

## I. Introduction

- A. **Matthew 17:14-21**, When [Jesus, Peter, James, and John] came [down from the Mount of Transfiguration, they came] to the crowd. A man came up to Jesus, and falling on his knees before Him said, [15] “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. [16] I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” [17] And Jesus answered and said (*to the father and the crowd*), “You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” [18] And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. [19] Then the disciples (*other nine*) came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” [20] And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. [21] But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”
- B. Last week we looked at how Christian faith differs from the faith by which everyone lives. We talked about God creating us to need Him, and creating faith as a means that enables us to enter into a meaningful relationship of mutual love and trust with Him. We went on from there to talk about little faith and the fact that most often, little faith is the result of responding to circumstances with fear instead of trusting God to take care of us. And finally, we talked about mustard seed faith, that is, having sufficient faith in God to give up our former life of selfishness and sin in order to become new creatures that live to please God in thought, word, and deed. Today we will talk about growing our faith, and the relationship between faith **and** prayer and fasting.

### C. Pray

## II. Faith for healing, miracles, casting out demons, doing the impossible

- A. Two weeks ago I asked the question, “Can we pump up faith for moments of need, or is faith for the need of the moment built on and strengthened by the faith we have for the rest of life?”
1. Based on stories in the Bible, I think we can assume that there are situations and times when God’s compassion makes it possible to gain

- His help even if we do not trust Him enough to live according to His will and word as we know we ought. However, these stories ought never be taken as the norm, but rather as God's gracious exceptions.
- a. For example, in **2 Kings 6:8-7:20**, we read that God was punishing the ten tribes of Israel for their idol worship and other sinful ways. God did this by bringing Ben-hadad, king of Aram to lay siege to Samaria, the capital city. In time, food became so scarce that the adults were turning to cannibalism to survive – eating their own children. The king of Israel became so angry at this that he said, “May God do so to me and more also, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat (*SHAY fat*) remains on him today.” Then the king sent a messenger to bring Elisha to the palace.
  - b. Instead of going with the messenger, Elisha sent word to the king that the next day the city would have an abundance of food. That night, four lepers decided it would be better to risk going to the enemy's camp and asking for food than to stay in Samaria and die of starvation. When they got to the camp, they found the army gone, because God caused the Aramean soldiers to hear the sound of a great army coming down on them, and so they fled – leaving all their supplies behind.
  - c. God is known to show this kind of mercy, but it is foolish to think there is wisdom in relying on such mercy as if it is God's norm – especially when we need a miraculous solution to a pressing need.
2. There are cases in God's word where God's people, who were not so godly at the time, cried out in desperation for God's help, and God gave it. You can find examples of this in the book of Judges. However, these are not examples of people with little faith pumping up their faith, but people in a desperate situation of their own making crying out to God for undeserved mercy. The point is, I know of no example in God's word where God's people pumped up their faith for the moment and got from God what they needed.
  3. It is my understanding from my reading of God's word that the normal way for Christians to have sufficient faith in the moment of need is to build their faith by making a sincere effort to trust God implicitly, do His will fully, and live according to His word – day by day. One place this truth is supported is in John's first letter.
    - a. **1 John 3:18-22**, “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth (*in behavior that is according to God's will and word*). [19] We will know by [living this way] that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him [20] in whatever

our heart condemns us (*i.e., though we know when and where we recently sinned, yet because of our commitment and efforts to godliness, we still have a legitimate reason to be confident that we are in good standing with God*); for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. [21] Beloved, **if** our heart does not condemn us, **we have confidence** before God; [22] and whatever we ask we receive from Him, **because** we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”

- b. There is a two-part principle here.
  - (1) **First Part:** If you are being honest with yourself about yourself and responding to what you see as a Christian ought, then you have a valid, God-supported confidence that you are in good standing with God.
  - (2) **Second Part:** If you have this confidence, then according to your faith, you will know that God hears your prayers and will answer accordingly.
- 4. The disciples asked Jesus to increase or give them more faith. Jesus’ response is found in **Luke 17:6-10**, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you. [7] Who, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? [8] But [rather he will] say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink.’ [9] He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? [10] So you too, when you (*as a Christian*) do all the things which are commanded you (*as found in God’s word*), say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”
  - a. In other words, the way for Christian faith to grow beyond what Jesus calls little faith is to **do** what God requires of you – which includes putting off what you know ought not to be in you and pursuing godliness as intentionally, honestly, and fully as you can.
  - b. The reality is, you will not, and in fact cannot live according to the will and word of God in this way without a sincere faith that God is good, that His word is true, that godliness is the only life worth living, and that you need His empowerment and aid to live this way.
- 5. In other words, using your faith to grow spiritually will result in a faith that continues to grow into mustard seed faith.

B. In **vs 21**, Jesus says, “But this kind (*of demon*) does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” Why did Jesus say this? And what is the relationship between faith **and** prayer and fasting when it comes to casting out demons who are able to resist those with little faith?

1. The first thing to understand is that there is no magical spiritual empowerment in prayer and fasting. Prayer and faster is not an end in itself.
  - a. For example, in **Matthew 6**, Jesus made it clear that praying and fasting to be seen by others, and as a result praised for being extra spiritual, gains you nothing with God or from God.
  - b. It is also likely the disciples prayed at least once a day, yet their faith was still little. And as for fasting – if it is fasting for the sake of fasting, it is simply another way to lose weight.
  - c. Finally, I think we can agree that praying and fasting in a mindless way – like those who continue working their way through their prayer beads while watching TV or reading a newspaper – is not the kind of praying and fasting Jesus is talking about.
2. If the combination of praying and fasting is to bring us to the place where we have that greater, mustard seed like faith that is capable of moving mountains, then our praying and fasting must be a means or pathway to whatever it is that builds our faith.
3. However, before exploring what praying and fasting must be directed toward in order to gain greater faith, I want to give you a bit of biblical and early church history on the practice of prayer and fasting.

C. With one possible exception, there is nothing in the OT Law, or the prophets, or the NT that commands or requires Christians to fast.

1. The one possible exception is the law concerning the Day of Atonement. This law is found in **Leviticus 16:29-30 (23:27-28)**, “This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall **humble** your souls (*HEB: or afflict or deny your souls – which many take to mean fasting*) and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; [30] for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD.”
2. However, there are a number of references to prayer and fasting in both the OT and NT.
  - a. In the OT, fasting was used to express sorrow over sin, and as part of an appeal to God for mercy and forgiveness. The combination of fasting and prayer was used when expressing deep sadness over

some tragedy and asking God to end the suffering. Prayer and fasting was also used when appealing to God for victory in battle or protection from an enemy or for safety in a time of danger.

- b. Some used fasting as a way of showing God the sincerity and urgency of their prayers. A few used times of prayer and fasting to focus their attention on spiritual growth, or as preparation for worship of God, or as proof of their devotion to God and His will.
  - c. According to references in the extra canonical books (*Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Wisdom, and 1&2 Maccabees*), some fasted and prayed in an effort to gain control over their passions, or to increase the spiritual strength needed for resisting temptation, or to have God-induced visions and dreams, or to purify their hearts in order to encounter God in a more personal, intimate, and real way.
3. In the NT, fasting is most often mentioned in the Gospels. There we read that John the Baptist, his disciples, and the Pharisees fasted regularly. Jesus fasted for 40 days following His baptism. And the book of Acts speaks of combining prayer and fasting for the purpose of selecting church leaders, sending out missionaries, seeking God's blessing on the work of the church, and as preparation for worship.
  4. Early church writers indicate that prayer and fasting was a common, yet voluntary part of the Christian life.

D. Sticking with the context of Jesus' words about prayer and fasting here in **Matthew 17**, let's look at what prayer and fasting must be directed toward in order to gain greater, mustard seed like faith.

1. According to the context, which includes Jesus saying their faith was too little, and according to **1 John 3:18-22** and **Luke 17:6-10**, then if we want a faith greater than the little faith Jesus speaks of (*and we ought*), and if we want mustard seed faith (*and we ought*), then our focus for praying and fasting must either be on spiritual growth or maintaining spiritual health. Why? Because these two areas of the Christian life provide the following five essentials for obtaining greater faith and properly exercising that faith.
  - a. Using prayer and fasting to pursue spiritual growth or maintain spiritual health leads us to needed truth regarding God, His ways, and His will that form and strengthen the basis for great faith.
  - b. Using prayer and fasting in this way leads to a practical and applicable understanding of God's word that takes us further in our pursuit of spiritual growth and maintaining spiritual health.

- c. Prayer and fasting used in this way grows our understanding of God's will and word that in turn enables us to have a workable knowledge of what is and isn't within the parameters of His will.
- d. Focusing prayer and fasting on spiritual growth and maintaining spiritual health leads to a dependable and realistic basis for discerning if we are living in a way that pleases God and therefore puts us in good standing with God.
- e. And finally, this kind of focus for prayer and fasting results in the confidence, that is, the mustard seed type faith confidence that God will hear and answer accordingly.

### III. Conclusion

- A. Last Sunday I explained the kind of faith a mustard seed must have to endure what it must go through to produce new life. If you were able to take that explanation and apply it to yourself, then you know that these words from Jesus provide the most direct path to greater faith. **John 12:24**, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."
- B. If you recall that the power is not in our faith, but in the One we put our faith in, then you know that the primary use of our faith for miracles is not to make life easier or more pleasing for ourselves, but to bring glory to God, to work for the good of others, and to promote the growth of God's kingdom – in individuals and in the church.
- C. In my opinion, within the Christian community, there is too much **little faith** and not enough **mustard seed faith**. May we, as God's children who have the ability, the opportunity, and the empowerment of God to grow in our faith – may we take full advantage of what we have to pursue the greatest and strongest faith possible in this life. And may the faith we obtain draw us ever nearer to God, ever deeper into the warmth of His embracing arms, and ever closer to the most meaningful relationship possible between the God who created us and ourselves.