

What is Faith, Exactly? (17:14-22)

Pray. Well I have **something embarrassing to share** with you guys this morning. I'm not proud of this, but I have become hooked on a reality dating show. The name of the show is *Love is Blind*, on Netflix. Anybody watch that one? So I'll be honest—reality dating shows aren't usually my top choice of entertainment. Pretty far down on my list, in fact. But I have found this one to be absolutely *riveting* television.

For those of you who don't know about the show, **the premise** is that all the contestants meet and get to know each other without *seeing* each other's appearance at all. They get to know each other by talking in a room together, with a wall separating them. And I would love to say that it is filled with rom-com-esque heartwarming moments, where people truly fall in love with each other's *personalities*. But in reality, it is mostly just like watching one trainwreck after another. Which is part of why it's so entertaining.

But on the most recent season—and don't worry, no significant spoiler alerts here—there is a contestant named **Shaina**. (Yeah people feel a lot of things about Shaina.) Shaina meets a guy named Kyle, and they *sort of* hit it off (*I promise this is going somewhere*). But as things start to get serious, Shaina all of a sudden realizes that Kyle is an atheist. Which for her is an issue, because she at least *considers herself* to be a Christian. In her words, “my faith is like, one of the most important things in my life.” And her concern is that if they don't share the same faith, the relationship won't work because they'll have all sorts of conflict and problems arising from that difference between them. And here's the thing: I actually agree with almost *all* of that...*in principle*. Two people who don't share the same assumptions about the world will generally have a hard time sharing a life together long-term.

But the interesting thing about *Shaina* saying that is that so far in the show, there has been **absolutely nothing**—and I mean *nothing*—**that would indicate she is a follower of Jesus**. She's full of herself, and extremely shallow. When getting to know guys, she asks them what they're wearing in a weird, oversexualized, phone-sex-hotline-worker sort of way. She doesn't care much at all about the other women on the show. In fact, she sees them purely as competition—obstacles in her way to whoever she wants to date on the show. And later in the show, she goes *out of her way* to sabotage other people's relationships. Just not a very pleasant human being. If you've never seen the show, just imagine the *personality* of Angela from *The Office*, but with botox and crop top shirts. That's Shaina.

Nothing about her life would indicate that she actually has a heart transformed by Jesus. And yet, she's *convinced* that if she gets engaged to this guy who *also* doesn't believe in

Jesus, it'll never work out. When in fact they might be *perfect* for one another, because *neither* of them are Christians. She just thinks *she is*. As a follower of Jesus, it's a *maddening* part of the show to watch happen.

So **feel free to watch the show** if you want some entertainment (or don't: that might be hours of my life I'll never get back). But here's why I bring it up: **while her perspective on faith is quite buffoonish in the show, I don't actually think it's that uncommon of a perspective when it comes to faith.** I think plenty of people, at least here in America, think about their faith pretty similarly to that. They see their faith as *one* important thing about them. Not *the* most important thing, mind you. Just *one of* them.

So **when these people think about their life**, they have their *family* over here, and their *career* over here, and their *hobbies* over here, and then over here in its own container is also their *faith*. And it's a hermetically sealed container just like all the others—no need for it to intermix or interfere with any of the other areas. It's *one* thing in their life. It *matters*, but only *sometimes*. It doesn't *have* to. It's a good *fallback*—it's *helpful* and *uplifting* when those other things let us down or fall through—but not much *more* than that. I think that is how a good many people tend to think about their faith.

But **by the end of today's passage**, we're going to see that **that's not at all how Jesus envisions faith.** When Jesus discusses *faith*, it's something that has *real-life consequences* and *real-life impact*. It's something that undergirds and guides every other aspect of our life, in the good times, and in the bad. Faith is the stuff life is *made* of. And before we're done, Jesus is going to show us that, and show us how to pursue *that type* of *lasting* faith as his people. So turn with me—if you haven't already—to **Matthew 17**. And we'll start reading at **v. 14**:

[14] *When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. [15] "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.*

So if you just stop right *here* in the passage, this story **reads like probably a dozen others** we've read in the gospel of Matthew so far: someone approaches Jesus and wants healing. In *this* case it's a man wanting Jesus to heal his son, who appears to be suffering from a form of epilepsy. The condition is bad enough and unpredictable enough that he is a *danger* to himself. So the father wants Jesus to heal his son. That's the situation: it's a very frequent type of occurrence in Jesus' ministry.

That is, until we read v. 16, where it says *this*. The father *continues*:

[16] *I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.*”

So here is where we find out that **this isn't just a story about a man who wants his son healed; it's a story about the disciples' inability to heal him.** So this man's request to Jesus is actually his *second* attempt at asking for healing after the *disciples* were unable to deliver on it the first time. **He's dissatisfied with his service and wants to speak to the manager.** Now remember **for context of this story:** Jesus has been up on the mountain with *three* of the disciples: Peter, James, and John. And evidently while *they* were up *there*, the rest of the disciples *tried* and *failed* to help this man's son. So the man brings his son to Jesus and asks *Jesus* to do what the disciples couldn't. Let's take a look at Jesus' *response*—v. 17:

[17] *“You unbelieving and perverse generation,”* (that escalated quickly, didn't it?) *Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.”*

Jesus responds by lamenting the “unbelieving and perverse generation” in front of him. Now most indicators are that he is directing this **at the disciples**, not the man who wants his son healed. But they are nonetheless **very strong words** for Jesus to use. So first let's make sure we understand what Jesus *means* and *doesn't* mean. He *doesn't* mean “you guys are exhausting and I can't wait until I don't have to be around you anymore.” Jesus is frustrated, but his frustration is not out of a selfish love for comfort, like you and I often have.

Rather, he is frustrated because after all the time he's *spent* with the disciples, and after all that they've seen *him* do and empower *them* to do, they apparently are still struggling to believe in who he is. **Back in Matthew 10**, it says that Jesus sent the disciples out and “...gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”¹ In the gospel of John, Jesus says that it's better that he should leave and go be with the Father, because then his disciples will do *even greater* “works” than what *he* has been doing.² So at least in *theory*, the disciples *should be able* to heal this man's son. So **Jesus isn't saying “ugh you guys are exhausting and I can't wait till I don't have to be around you any longer.” He's saying “how long do I have to be here to show you that you are capable of doing the things I've already empowered you to do?”** Do you hear the difference?

And further, his words here are **drawn directly out of another passage in the Old Testament**. In fact, the whole sequence of events in Matthew 17 is reminiscent of

¹ Matthew 10:1

² John 14:12

another story in Exodus that we mentioned briefly last week. In Exodus 32, Moses goes up on a mountain to speak with God, and when he comes back down the mountain, he finds all of the Israelites in disarray. While he was gone, they have all taken off their jewelry, melted it down to form a golden calf, and are now *worshipping* the golden calf they created. There's also some weird sexual stuff going on as part of this brand new pagan religion they have invented. Just on the whole, not a great day for the people of Israel. Not in the highlight reel.

So Moses is gone for a bit, and he comes down to find the rest of the people failing to trust and love God in pretty substantial sorts of ways. Even though, remember: they had just seen God do *incredible things* on their behalf! Parting the seas, providing water in the desert out of a random rock. They had seen God do the *incredible*, and yet still neglected to trust him for provision. This story in Matthew is written almost like a *retelling* of that story from Exodus. And then *later in Moses' life, when he is reflecting* on and *grieving* moments like these from Israel's history, he says this:

He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. They are corrupt and not his children; to their shame they are a warped and crooked generation.³

Does that last part sound familiar at all to us? So *we think Jesus was either translating or just alluding to these words of Moses* when he says “you *unbelieving and perverse* generation” in our passage. Which means he sees in the disciples and the people of Israel a version of the same hard-heartedness and failure to trust that was evident in the story of the Exodus. And that posture is demonstrated, evidently, in how they could not heal the boy suffering from epilepsy.

So after making *that* comment, Jesus simply says the words, “*bring the boy here* to me.” And that's what happens. Verse 18:

[18] Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

Now just *real briefly here*: this part of the story seems to indicate that this boy's illness was the result of demon possession. I realize that might seem weird to us, since we thought he just had a medical condition. And some people have used stories like these to insist that all *sickness or disease* is due to demonic activity. But I think that's a mistake. There are *plenty* of places in the New Testament where Jesus comes across

³ Deuteronomy 32:4-5

someone with an illness, and says *nothing* about it being demonic in origin. But *sometimes*, the two did *overlap*. And evidently, this was one of those times. So **the passage speaks of Jesus casting out a demon, not because that's always how Jesus healed sickness, but because that's how he healed *this* illness.** Does that all make sense? Just felt like that was worth clarifying.

But really, **whatever your thoughts are** on all of *that*, **that's really beside the point.** Because remember: **this story actually isn't primarily about the healing itself. It's about how the disciples couldn't perform the healing without Jesus there.** Which is why the passage ends the way it does: with a *conversation* between Jesus and the disciples about what just went down. Take a look with me at v. 19, because this is really the *focus* of the story:

[19] Then the disciples came to **Jesus in private** and asked, "Why couldn't **we** drive it out?"

So this is **the question any of us would've asked** if we were in the disciples' position: "Jesus, why couldn't we drive it out? Why couldn't we do it?" Remember: Jesus *has* and *will continue* to empower his disciples to do things like this. And the disciples know that; they *know* that they *should've* been able to cast it out. So they want to know why they *couldn't*. Here's Jesus' answer, v. 20:

[20] He replied, "**Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as **small as a mustard seed**, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from **here** to **there**,' and it will move. **Nothing** will be **impossible** for you."** [21]

The reason they couldn't do it is **something that Jesus has been saying** to them in nearly every story during this section of Matthew: *because they have so little faith. That's why they couldn't heal the boy.* And then Jesus says **the same thing, but puts it positively:** "truly I tell you: if you *have* faith as *small* as a *mustard seed*, you could say to this mountain, 'move from here to there,' and it would happen. (If you have just the tiniest amount of faith) *nothing* will be impossible for you."

Now, obviously this is **meant as hyperbole** from Jesus: he's been telling the disciples this non-stop for a while now, so now he's using the *strongest possible language* to try and get them to *hear* it. **A mustard seed was the smallest imaginable item they could think of back then (you and I might say something like "the size of a grain of sand"). He says if you have even *that* amount of faith, you could move *mountains* with it. "Moving mountains" is actually still an expression we use *today* for accomplishing the impossible. A little Dianna Ross, anybody? "Ain't No Mountain"? It's still an expression we use today.**

But back then it had an *added layer of meaning*. Ancient people often believed that the mountains had *roots*—almost like trees but much bigger—going down *deep into* the ground. So he's telling them if they have even the smallest amount of faith, they could pull these mountains up by the roots and move them. **Jesus is trying to get his disciples to see that there are massive, real-life implications for possessing even the smallest amount of faith.**

So I want us to *slow down for just a moment and really dissect* what Jesus is saying here. Because it would be easy to come away from this passage with some misunderstandings about it. **For instance, some people have used passages like this one to say that any time someone wants to be healed, but isn't healed, it must be because of a lack of faith.** So someone wants healing, they ask a follower of Jesus to heal them, and it doesn't happen, and that follower of Jesus says "well, I guess you just didn't have enough faith."

But in my opinion, *not only is that to misapply* the passage, it's also just failing to read it very closely. Because **Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples for failing to reach an optimal level of faith—he rebukes them for not having hardly any faith at all.** He literally says "all you need is the *tiniest* amount of faith, and with that, you can accomplish nearly everything." Jesus isn't looking for super-Christians, chock full of faith, with their spiritual capes waving in the wind. He's looking for people with a very simple, small amount of trust in what the Spirit of God can do. **Jesus does not need you and I to have impressive faith; he just needs us to have faith in the first place.**

Which *raises the question: what is faith, exactly?* So *an illustration may be helpful* here. Eric: bring me that *chair* if you don't mind. So for at least the last 75 years or so, pastors and bible teachers have used a very simple illustration to help people understand what is meant by the word "faith" in the bible: a *chair*. So I figured, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, I'd just stick with what *they've* always said. So *the word "faith"* in the Greek language is the word *pistis*. It can be translated *faith*, or *belief*, or *confidence*...but I think the most *helpful* translation for us in the English language is the word *trust*. **When Jesus talks about "faith," what he's referring to is trust in who he is. And trust in what he is capable of—including what he's capable of when he works through us.**

And *trust is a real-life type* of thing. You *can't really fake trust*, at least not very well. For instance, if you asked me if I *trusted* that that chair would hold me up, I could tell you "yes I do." But then if you said "okay, sit in the chair," and I *refused* to...you would

correctly argue that I do not, in fact, *trust* that that chair will hold me up. I *don't* actually have enough *trust* in the chair to sit down in it. *Trust* is a *real-life* sort of thing.

Now, **there are a variety of ways to display** your trust in that chair, right? So I can do it with a lot of *bravado*. I can make a *big deal* out of my confidence and trust in the chair. I can say “I am the type of person who always trusts *chairs!*” And I can sing songs loudly about the *trustworthiness* of the chair: ♪♪ *Great is thy faithfulness, O Chair!* ♪♪ I can become *known* by all of my peers as the person who, no matter the situation or the circumstances, *always*—and I do mean *always*—sits down in chairs. I can do *all of that*, and *then* sit down on the chair. And that's *faith*.

Or...or, I can approach the chair with a great deal of *hesitancy*. I can have some fear and some doubts and some reservations about it. I can be very *tentative* about it. I can decide to do some research on the chair manufacturer and the reliability of the materials used *in making* the chair. I can wrestle *thoroughly* with what it looks like to *trust* a chair like this. And after all of *that*, I can decide that the chair is trustworthy, and decide to sit down in it, even if I struggle with the decision at times. *That is also faith*.

But I think **what Jesus is trying to say in this passage** is that *how you decide to trust the chair, and how you feel about your trust in the chair is at best, of only secondary importance*. What matters, at the end of the day, is just one thing: do you *sit* in the chair? Or do you *not*? *That's* what faith is: whether or not you sit down. How you *arrived* at that level of trust in the chair is up to you. But if you're willing to sit in the chair, Jesus says that he can use *that* to accomplish unbelievable types of things. All that he asks, is that you trust enough to sit down in it.

So let's **bring it out of illustration world** and bring it **into real life**. Let me try and give you some actual *scenarios* to see what *faith* looks like out in the wild. **Single people in the room**: let's say you're a follower of Jesus, and you *know* what the Scriptures teach about how it's a bad idea to date someone who's not a believer.⁴ You *know* that. But at the same time, you're dating someone who's not a believer, and it's kinda great. They make you feel really good about you and about life—and you're thinking “surely God wouldn't be against *this*.” And it seems like you've at least got *enough* in common to make it work. Plus, *not* being with someone is awful. 0/10 experience. But at the end of the day, you know what the Scriptures teach. Okay, in that scenario, *faith* would look like breaking off the relationship because you trust God's design for those relationships. And you trust him to be *enough*, even if that means a *season* or a *life* of singleness as a result. That's *sitting down* in the chair. That's *faith*.

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 6:14.

I'll give you *another* one. **New parents** in the room: let's say you're trying to help your baby learn to calm down on their own and go to sleep. And let's say it's midnight, and they start *crying* in the other room. And you know they don't need to eat, you know they don't need a diaper change—but it's been fifteen seconds and you just feel like you need to go in there. Just to make sure they're not dying or something. Okay, in that scenario: trust may very well look like staying put—at least for the moment. It could mean *trusting* that the way God watches over your kid is much more reliable than your ability to immediately console your kid. It means trusting that it's a good thing for your kid to function at times, without you immediately by their side. That's sitting down on the chair. That's *faith*.

Another one. Those of you who have been **hurt or burned by the Church**. Those who *know* God's intention is for you to be an active part of a local body of believers where you can know others and *be known* yourself. You *know* that is God's design, but it's just so unappealing to you because of past experiences. And just everything in you just wants to go "you know what? I'll just listen to a podcast or a pastor online and that'll be basically the same as a church." Okay in *that* scenario: **faith would look like putting forth the effort to be a part of a local community of believers, even if that's difficult and even if you need to slowly ease your way into it as you wrestle with past hurts**. But you're doing that because you *trust* God's design for you as a follower of Jesus as it relates to the Church. *That's* sitting down on the chair. That's *faith*.

And **we could go on** with examples just like that. But I want you to see the essence of what faith is. It's a *real-life* thing. Faith is trusting in God's *purposes* and God's *intentions* and God's *provision*—even if and when things *in* you want to *war against* it. But it's trusting in all those things, not just in *theory*, but in *practice*. It's actually sitting down in it. It's not just *knowing* or *acknowledging* that God will provide or that God is enough, but structuring your life in such a way that you *bank* on God being enough.

And **in some areas** of life, that's **probably really easy** for us to do. There's probably some parts of our life where we have very few hesitations about trusting God, and we can almost do it without even thinking much about it. *And* at the same time, there are probably *other* areas of life where we're doing it with hands and hearts *trembling*. We're doing it with *doubts* and *uncertainty* and *reservations*. But what matters is that we're *still sitting down in the chair*. **Faith can come in all shapes and sizes and attitudes and appearances. But Jesus says if we have faith like a mustard seed—like a grain of sand—he can and will accomplish incredible things through that faith, no matter how small.**

So **one question we might ask** is **why does the amount of faith not matter** as much? Just rationally speaking, it seems like that should be relevant, right? Why doesn't it matter? I think there's one simple reason: because **faith is not about how much of it you have—it's about whether or not it's in the right place**. How *boldly* or *hesitantly* I sit in the chair doesn't ultimately matter, right? What matters is the *strength* of the *chair*. It doesn't matter how I sit in it, what matters is whether or not it can hold me up. **Faith is always more about the object of it than it is about the amount of it.**

And **I can tell you** without reservation this morning that **the object of our faith, as followers of Jesus, is the most sure thing in the universe**. We don't have to *wonder* whether or not God can hold us up. We don't have to *wonder* whether or not he's trustworthy. We don't have to wonder about his intentions towards us or his purposes for us. They're all *trustworthy*. They're *worthy* of our faith. Paul in the book of **Romans** says we can know that because of the *cross*. "If God did not spare his own *son* for us, but graciously gave him up for us all," how will he not also, *with him*, give us all things?" If ever we *doubt* God's provision, God's *love*, God's *intentions*—we get to look straight ahead at the cross, where God withheld *nothing* for our sake. Not even his *son*. That's how we can know he can be trusted.

But let's say you *know* all of that, but you still feel like you struggle with faith and trust in who God is. I would imagine that's a situation many of us have found ourselves in a time or two in our lives, right? **Let's say we're wanting to increase** our confidence level in who God is, and what he's capable of. How exactly do we do *that*? Well, the answer to *that* is actually in the passage *too*. But it's *hidden* in it. Like, *literally* hidden.

Look back with me at your bibles if you will, and scan down with me to the very *end* of v. 20. Do you notice anything *weird* about the end of that verse and the beginning of the next one? (Specifically about the verse *numbers*) There's a *verse* missing. Matthew 17 goes from the end of v. 20, straight to v. 22. Now, if you've got a bible like mine, it might give you a footnote there that explains *why* there's a verse missing. Mine says "Some *manuscripts* include here words similar to Mark 9:29." So this is a bit technical, but what happened here is that years and years ago, when this passage was translated, it *included* v. 21. But then, as more and more original manuscripts were *discovered*, *less* and *less* of them included that verse. So as that happened, *newer* translations left that verse out, and included a *footnote* to explain why.

But here's the thing: **whether or not Matthew intended** to include another verse there, we know for sure that Jesus did *say* the words that were *in* v. 21. Because the other parallel accounts of this same story *do* include them. So let's look at the verse *formerly known as* v. 21, up on the screen. I've just taken this directly from **Mark 9:29**:

[Jesus] He replied, “This kind can come out **only by prayer.**”

When Jesus’ disciples ask him why they couldn’t heal the boy, Jesus says to them “this kind can only come out through *prayer*.” So it’s hard to nail down precisely, but reading between the lines just a *little*, **it seems like the disciples had forgotten the source of the power required for healing. If they didn’t pray to ask God to heal the boy, that means that they thought they were capable of pulling it off on their own.** So with this added statement, Jesus is calling the disciples into what we just talked about. He’s telling them one more time that **the faith required to do incredible things isn’t about the amount of it you have; it’s about who your faith is in.** Do you see that?

Okay so **for us: if we want to grow in faith**, it would seem that ground zero for doing that would be *prayer*—would it not? **Prayer is one of the best ways to investigate whether or not we possess faith. Because prayer is trust and dependency in action.** If we *trust* in God’s ability, we will often be *quick* to *pray*. If we *don’t* much trust God’s ability, we will be *slow* to pray. It’s as simple as that.

But listen: **it also works in reverse.** If you want to *grow* in faith, one of the best ways to do that is to spend more time in prayer. A guy named Paul Miller, who wrote one of the best books on prayer I’ve ever read—he calls *prayer* “*learned helplessness*.”⁵ In other words, **every time we pray, we are resetting our minds and hearts on the reality that we have nothing to offer on our own.** If we were sufficient on our own, there would be no *reason* to pray. But because we’re *not* sufficient on our own, we *do*.

And **there’s something about taking that posture**, over and over again, that realigns our hearts with what is true about us, and what’s true about God. Every time you pray, you’re resetting on the reality that there’s someone more powerful than you, more wise than you, and someone who is more *reliable* than your own strength and abilities. You’re saying “God, I need *you* to be working on this and thinking on this, because if it’s all up to me it won’t go well.” Prayer is *learned helplessness*. And don’t you think if we were to *learn* a little helplessness, it would go a long way towards generating *faith* and trust in us for God? I’d be willing to bet it would.

To put it another way, every time we pray, it’s like a tiny gospel *reminder*. The gospel tells us that we bring nothing to the table, and Jesus provides everything through his life, death and resurrection. When we *pray*, we’re reminding ourselves of all of that: that we bring nothing to the table, and Jesus brings everything. And as we do that, day-in and

⁵ Miller, Paul. *A Praying Life*, p. 260.

day-out, it will chip away at our self-reliance and sinful independence, and will increase our trust in God's ability on our behalf. So **if you want to grow in *faith*, try making a disciplined effort to grow in *prayer*. And over time, watch that blossom into *faith* in your heart towards God.**

You see **faith is something that only works when practiced in real life**. It's not one important *aspect* of your life—it's the explanation behind *all* of your life. It's something that either impacts all of your life in real ways...or it *doesn't*. **You either sit in the chair, or you don't**. So let's all ask Jesus together, by the power of the Spirit, to increase our faith. And let's participate in regular *practices* like *prayer* that do precisely that. **Prayer is *learned helplessness*. We are all *helpless*—we just tend to forget it sometimes. Prayer helps us *remember who God is, who we are, and what he is able to accomplish through us*.**"

So on that note, let's pray.