

# A question of faith

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- [ 0 : 00 ] Today's reading is from Matthew 17, verses 14 to 27, which can be found on the Church Bible on page 984.
- 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. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.
- You unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.
- Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, Why couldn't we drive it out?
- [ 1 : 13 ] 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. When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.
- They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life. And the disciples were filled with grief. After Jesus and his disciples arrived at Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma temple tax came to Peter and said, Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?
- Yes, he does, he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. What do you think, Simon? he asked.
- From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes? From their own children or from others? From others, Peter answered. Then the children are exempt, Jesus said to him.
- [ 2 : 25 ] But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch, open its mouth, and you will find a four drachma coin.
- Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, thank you so much, Lakshmi, for reading.
- And it'd be a great help if you keep your Bibles open at Matthew chapter 17. Brilliant to see you. Let me add my welcome to David's and Martin's.
- Let's ask for the Lord's help as we come to this passage. Father, we thank you so much for your word to us.
- And we pray that the Holy Spirit would apply it to our hearts and minds. Would you deepen our appreciation of the gospel?
- [ 3 : 26 ] Would you strengthen our faith in the Lord Jesus? Would you build our confidence in him? It's in his name that we ask.
- Amen. Well, the former prime minister and former television personality, Boris Johnson, was once asked about his faith.

Now, I don't think he's a Christian. I don't think he claimed to be that, but he was asked about his faith. And this is how he replied. I suppose my own faith, you know, is a bit like trying to get virgin radio when you're driving through the Chiltern Hills.

It comes and goes. I mean, sometimes the signal is strong. And then sometimes I'm afraid it just vanishes. Then it comes back again.

That's Boris Johnson's take on faith. Well, if you were asked today about your faith, I wonder how would you answer?

[ 4 : 34 ] And maybe you're here today and you're not sure what you believe. You're not sure yet what you think about the Christian faith. And we're really glad that you're here with us.

You're in the right place to explore the Christian faith. And this is a great passage for that. But many of us here, I suppose the majority of us here, would profess to have faith in Jesus.

And I wonder then, how is your faith? And what kind of faith do we have when troubles come our way, when life throws an unexpected curveball at us?

Or simply when God calls us to trust him in whatever lies ahead, with all the uncertainties, with all the unknowns that there may be?

What kind of faith do you have? That's what we're thinking about today. And do you still trust Jesus when things don't go as you'd planned or hoped or imagined?

[ 5 : 38 ] We see in our passage two kinds of faith. Jesus' disciples are having a bad faith day, you could say. A faith malfunction.

They're unable to heal the boy. And Jesus rebukes them for that in verse 20, for having so little faith. And then this kind of faith is contrasted in the very same verse with the mustard seed faith that can move mountains.

Faith, in other words, that works. And so we've got three headings this morning. They're in the notice sheets if you find that helpful for following along. Firstly, have faith in Jesus, not in yourself.

Now you may have noticed as Lakshmi read for us this passage that the focus in this first section is less on the actual healing than on the response.

Now it's not that the healing doesn't matter, it does. But Matthew draws our attention here to the response. Now the father is down on his knees begging Jesus.

[ 6 : 49 ] And the reason he's begging Jesus is because the disciples were unable to heal the boy. So look at verse 16.

And it's palpable. You can sense the distress. You can feel the distress of the father. I brought him to your disciples. But they couldn't heal him.

And actually, this should come as something of a surprise to us. It should be something that makes us pause and wonder and take notice. What's up with the disciples?

What's up with them? Why can't they do this? You see, in our sermon series, we jumped straight in at chapter 16 this time. But if you'd been reading through the whole of Matthew's gospel, perhaps in your daily time in the Bible, you'd remember, and you don't need to turn there now, but you'd remember perhaps back in chapter 10, beginning of chapter 10, there we see Jesus giving his disciples authority to do just this, to drive out evil spirits and to heal the sick.

This is something they've been authorized to do. This is something they've been able to do. This is something they've been able to do up to now. But here, they're unable.

[ 8 : 12 ] In our passage, they're unable. And we can see their confusion in verse 19, after Jesus healed the boy. The disciples come to Jesus in private.

Perhaps they're feeling a little bit embarrassed at their failure. But they ask him, why couldn't we do it? Maybe this is something that we can relate to.

You're doing something that you know you can do, but then all of a sudden, it doesn't work. For me, that can sometimes involve computers.

It can sometimes involve trying to bake a cake. Recently, I'd tried to set up a Microsoft Teams call. I hadn't done so for a while, and I'd managed to set it up in such a way that I'd made Martin the host, unbeknownst to him.

So I found myself in the unusual situation of waiting to be admitted, along with everybody else, into my own meeting, until we'd worked out what was going on.

[ 9 : 16 ] But the disciples here are unable to do what they know they can do. So they ask Jesus about it, and his response is very striking.

Verse 17, he's already rebuked them. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? And the strength of Jesus' response might take us aback.

But there's a parallel here with Moses that maybe gives us just a little bit of insight into the strength of Jesus' response. So just as Moses, when he was descending from Mount Sinai and was confronted by Israel's idolatry, they're turning away from true faith in the Lord, which was a very precarious time for the people of God.

So too, when Jesus returns from the Mount of Transfiguration, he encounters unbelief and spiritual opposition among the disciples. You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?

How long shall I put up with you? Jesus knows that he's going to be leaving them, and he knows that in many ways, the future of a church depends on these guys.

[ 10 : 37 ] And when they ask why, why can't we do it? He replies, verse 20, because you have such little faith.

Now what does Jesus mean? What's the difference between this little faith and the mustard seed faith that Jesus commends to them later on in the very same verse?

Faith as small as a mustard seed. What does he mean? And in particular for us, what is this faith that Jesus says would have worked?

That seems to be the thrust of what Matthew's concerned about here. The disciples are experiencing a faith malfunction, and we need to work out why so that we don't fall into the same kind of trap.

So what does Jesus mean? Well, we can say first what it's not about. That's sometimes a helpful way to start. And when Jesus accuses them of having such little faith, he can't be talking about the relative size of their faith.

[ 11 : 46 ] That can't be it, because the faith he commends, verse 20, is as small as a mustard seed, proverbially small faith. It's not the quantity of their faith.

It's not how big their faith is. It's not how strong their faith is. You know, that hopefully comes as something of a relief to us, something of comfort, something of a liberation for us.

For any of us today who are struggling one way or another in our faith, struggling with doubts or difficult situations, for any of us here today who are worrying about the size of your faith, feeling that your faith is somehow too small, too weak, too insufficient.

And maybe you're just simply daunted about whatever it is that's in front of you. Maybe you've been blindsided in recent weeks by circumstances or disappointments.

Maybe you've just slipped up again this week in your battle with a persistent sin. Maybe you're here today, and as far as your faith is concerned, you're just hanging on by a thread, hanging on by your fingernails, so to speak.

[ 13 : 12 ] You come to church, everyone around you seems so sorted. You feel, my faith is just so small. But here it's not about the size of the faith.

It's not the size of your faith that counts. So that, of course, begs the question, what is it? What is this true faith? And it's not the first time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus has rebuked his disciples for lacking in faith.

And we get a really vivid picture of that in chapter 14. So if you just flick back a couple of pages, and Jesus is walking on water in chapter 14.

And Peter wants to go out to him. And so he gets out of the boat in verse 29 and starts walking towards Jesus. But then what happens in verse 30?

Peter sees the wind. He takes his eyes off Jesus, and he looks at his circumstances. He thinks, what on earth am I doing?

[ 14 : 24 ] And he begins to flounder, he begins to sink. And notice verse 31, the way Jesus rebukes him. You of little faith, he says. Why do you doubt?

Little faith then, back in chapter 17, is the disciples looking to themselves, to their own ability, rather than looking to Jesus. He wants us to see that faith then is about the object of our faith.

It is faith in Jesus. And the gospel writer Mark is explicit in his account of the same episode. The disciples weren't able to drive out the demon because they hadn't prayed.

They attempted it in their own strength, rather than in the name of Jesus. Faith that works then, faith that works, is faith that depends not on ourselves, but on Jesus, he who is the object of our faith.

And we're to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. We're to keep our eyes fixed on him. And as we do that, keeping our eyes fixed on him here in this narrative, just observe the incredible contrast between the inability of the disciples, verse 16, they couldn't heal him, and the power and the grace of the Lord Jesus.

[ 15 : 59 ] He rebukes the disciples, how long shall I put up with you? And then with great authority, he says, bring the boy to me.

He is able where they were unable. Jesus is able where we are unable.

And we're to have faith, therefore, not in ourselves, but in Jesus. It's not the size of our faith, it's the object of our faith that counts.

And secondly, we're to have faith in Jesus specifically, who died and rose again. So it's just a couple of verses here, verses 22 and 23.

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and then on the third day, he will be raised to life.

[ 17 : 02 ] I wonder, what did you make of these sections when they were read out? These two verses here and then the next bit about the temple text. I must confess that when I first looked at this passage at first glance, they seemed just a little bit random, a little bit like Matthew's arranging a kind of scrapbook of material.

But assuming that it's been deliberately arranged and it is the Word of God, then what's Matthew up to? Why has he put these bits next to each other?

And sometimes it can be helpful to take a step back in order to see the wood from the trees. And I've got an architect friend who spent about a decade of his life designing a single staircase.

And it's a beautiful staircase where every single tile was different, had to be carefully designed. And he'd be zoomed in there right on his computer screen, so immersed in the details, months on end, that if he wasn't careful he'd be in danger of losing sight of the bigger picture of what he was trying to do.

And it can be a little bit like that when we're reading the Bible. We can get lost in the details and sometimes it's a good idea just to zoom out a little bit to see the bigger picture.

[ 18 : 23 ] Sometimes diagram sketches can help, so if you're somebody who likes to journal when you're reading the Bible, then it's sometimes helpful to scribble out the different sections.

The heading for this section in the church Bible reminds us that this isn't the first time that Jesus predicts his own death. This is the second of three times.

So if you flick back a page to chapter 16 which we looked at just a couple of weeks ago, the other side of the transfiguration, remember we've got that very important question that Jesus asks in verse 15.

Who do you say that I am? And that's followed by Jesus' answer that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

And then straight away Jesus says, yes, but first I must suffer and die. So as we remember this wider context of the question of Jesus' identity, identity, I wonder if what's going on here as we have this condemnation of little faith and commendation of true mustard seed faith.

[ 19 : 40 ] And as we see Jesus presented here as the Messiah who must suffer and die and rise, well Matthew is saying to us, true faith, true faith isn't abstract, it isn't generic, it isn't woolly like that.

No, it's faith in Jesus, faith in this Jesus. It's not vague, it's not a woolly faith like Boris Johnson was expressing.

Matthew is saying to us that true faith isn't like that. It isn't a hazy idea that comes and goes but true faith, faith that works is faith in the historical Jesus, the Messiah who died in the place of sinners and was raised to life for us.

It's faith in the saving death and resurrection of this Jesus. He is the object of that faith. He is the object of our faith.

Now did you notice in verse 23 the disciples are just beginning to absorb the announcement of Jesus' death. Verse 23, end of verse 23, the disciples were filled with grief.

[ 20 : 55 ] Just beginning to absorb the announcement of Jesus' death but they've got a long way to go before they can get their heads around the resurrection and it's only actually after Jesus died and was raised from the grave that we see the disciples exercising this kind of true faith.

That's what it's going to take, Jesus' death and resurrection. To have faith not in ourselves but in Jesus. This Jesus who died and rose again.

Okay, finally, we're to have faith in Jesus verses 24 to 27 and then we can receive a tax exemption or might we be thinking about something else in these verses.

Let's take a look at it. So arriving in Capernaum, Jesus and his disciples are questioned about the temple tax. Then the upshot is Jesus gives Peter instructions to go fishing.

Take the first fish you catch, open its mouth and you will find a coin that covers our taxes. Again, I wonder what you thought when we read this. I mean, what are we supposed to do with a verse like that?

[ 22 : 12 ] The deadline for the UK tax returns is looming. It's less than two weeks to go. Are we supposed to take up fly fishing?

Find the nearest angling shop perhaps? Yeah, I looked it up. Get ourselves down to the Clyde, maybe find a nice spot along the Brummelaw, something like that and get fishing.

Are we supposed to find a tax rebate in the mouth of a fish? Well, leaving aside the fact that it wouldn't be far off a miracle to find a fish in the murky waters of the Clyde, this passage doesn't give us grounds for expecting to find a tax rebate in the mouth of a fish.

If only we had enough faith. That isn't the point, obviously, that Matthew's making. The question in hand, verse 24, is does Jesus pay the temple tax?

Does Jesus pay or not? This leads on to a really interesting exchange between Jesus and Peter. In verse 25, Jesus asked them, what do you think?

[ 23 : 25 ] From whom do kings collect taxes? From their own children or from their subjects? And then Peter gives the obvious answer there in verse 26, from others, of course.

Jesus makes the staggering claim, verse 26, then the children are exempt. He's still going to pay the tax.

He doesn't have to, but he's going to pay it anyway as a concession so as not to give offence. But the implications for us are clear.

God is the king to whom the tax belongs. The temple is his house. Jesus is exempt for he is the son of God.

Again, we see that the focus is on Jesus' identity. It maybe helps us to see that on the diagram on the screen again. Matthew is saying, look, Jesus is the son of God.

[ 24 : 29 ] That's what Peter confessed back in chapter 16. That's what the voice declared in the cloud. This is my beloved son. Listen to him. That's what we're seeing in this section.

To he himself is the true son who doesn't need to pay the tax. Amazingly, those who follow Jesus, those of us who place our faith in the Lord Jesus, also become children of God.

Remarkably, Jesus, the son of God, brings us into his new kingdom with all the benefits that that brings.

Put your faith in me, says Jesus. Put your faith in me, and now you're with me. Well, it was reported this week that a group of Aston Villa football fans got a shock of their lives when his royal highness the prince of Wales Prince William turned up at would you believe it a Weatherspoons pub in Birmingham.

One tabloid news outlet reported that stunned drinkers thought that they'd enjoyed one too many when the prince of Wales popped in for a pint.

[ 25 : 54 ] For this delighted group of fans, they got to hang out with the future king. And William even reportedly got a round in but the bar staff remained tight-lipped as to who paid for it.

That gives us a little bit of an illustration doesn't it? I guess you don't want to push it too far but if William had invited them back to his place after then that would have been even more like it.

If we locate our faith in Jesus then we're with him. We're treated as sons and daughters of the king.

And in supplying the four drachma coin Jesus shows his love for his disciple Peter providing the cost not only for his tax but for the both of them.

later on in Matthew's gospel we're told that Jesus would ransom his own life would give his life as a ransom for many and compared to that Jesus present provision for Peter will seem trivial I suppose.

[ 27 : 10 ] It's not that Jesus doesn't provide for the needs of his followers he does sometimes in the most extraordinary ways and I'm sure many of us here would testify to that but Jesus has paid an even greater debt that we owed the debt for our sins and in doing so brings us into his kingdom so this is true faith faith that works faith not in yourself but faith in the Lord Jesus this Lord Jesus the son of God who died for your sins and rose again this is the faith that works so let's look back at what Jesus said in verse 20 what did he say there 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

Jesus is saying that even if you have this proverbially small faith then you'll be able to do something proverbially enormous he's saying that mustard seed faith will enable his disciples to overcome all the challenges all the obstacles that God has called us to that God has set before us it's not a blank check it's not just have enough faith and then you can do whatever you want you can ask for whatever you want expect it to happen but it's a faith in Jesus that equips us for all that the Lord has set before us Jesus had authorized his 12 disciples to heal the sick and drive out demons they took their eyes off Jesus started relying on their own abilities rather than depending on him in faith and so the mountain in front of them as it were remained unmoved and so for us then

Jesus says if we exercise faith in the son of God dying in our place and rising to life again if we depend on him and whatever it is that God has in store for us in our life walking after Jesus picking up our cross following him whatever it is that God has in store for us we can do not because our faith is great but because our faith is in the one who is great the son of God and as we look to him all the resources we need for all that he has called us to for all that he has purposed in our lives for us all the resources are there at our disposal we simply need to keep looking away from ourselves and keep looking to Christ let me close with a story there was a famous 19th century preacher who was lying in bed after a long illness his friend came to his bedside concerned to uphold his faith for him and at his bedside his friend reminded him of how

Christians can make the mistake of turning our eyes inwards and scrutinizing our faith instead of looking to Jesus the object of our faith we can try to look within and summon up within ourselves the faith from within and to illustrate how absurd that is his friends gave him the example of a bridge imagine you come to a bridge he said and you're in doubt about trusting yourself to it what are you going to do to get confident about its safety when you look closely at the bridge you examine it you don't just stand there and turn your thoughts in on yourself and try to muster the confidence from within you look at the bridge maybe you're still not sure what then you continue to examine the bridge until you're satisfied one way or the other keep looking to Christ if you're still not sure about him then let me urge you to keep looking at Christ keep examining his claims and maybe an idea would be to read through

Matthew's gospel or if you've not thought about it maybe come along to the life course on Wednesday for the rest of us it's not the amount of our faith it's who our faith is placed and it's the object of our faith faith in the risen Lord Jesus the Son of God who brings us into his kingdom that's the kind of faith we need shall we pray Lord God we thank you for the reminder that we do well not to trust in ourselves not in our own strength not in our own ability but that we should fix our eyes upon the Lord Jesus and place our faith in him the Son of God who died in our place who rose again to glory who brings us into his kingdom so would you equip us and provide for us our every need for all that you have called us to in the days ahead in Jesus name

[ 33 : 00 ] Amen