

Faith like grain of mustard seed..

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[0 : 00] This evening, we come to the next section in Matthew, where we come across the famous words, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you.

Now these verses are famous. As Christians, we love putting them on jumpers or coffee mugs and little frames or photos. It's what you call a classic Pinterest Bible verse.

It's so simple, we have nursery rhymes about it. We love the image it paints in our minds of a tiny little seed triumphing over a big, towering mountain.

You're probably thinking, it's a classic kind of verse to give to the ministry trainee, right? I mean, it's so simple, a child could understand it. Well, I initially thought it was too.

Because keep the verse in its frame and on the mantelpiece and it's nice and easy. But take that verse and put it back into its proper context and it gets you asking all sorts of different questions.

[1 : 08] It's also a passage that some people love to twist. Twist to make say all sorts of different and destructive things. So it's a passage that's left me scratching my head time and time again in preparation.

But in those moments, especially when dealing with difficult passages of Scripture, it leads you to come to God again, needy in prayer, asking and trusting in His provision. So this evening, we're just simply going to be taking these famous verses, putting them back into their proper context and seeking to understand them together.

So let's begin by setting the proper context. Because it's important to note that our passage this evening comes hot off the heels from the glorious mountaintop scene of the Transfiguration.

The scene where we were taken to the top of the mountain and given a glimpse of Jesus' glory and majesty. As His face shone like the sun and His clothes became as white as light.

The scene where we got to see Him be joined by Moses and Elijah. And the scene where we heard the voice of God and His clear instruction. This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.

[2 : 26] Listen to Him. But as quickly as Matthew takes us up the mountain, He just as quickly takes us back down again. It only takes till verse 14, which is the start of our passage this evening, for us to be taken all the way back down to the bottom again.

Back in the valley. That's where our passage begins this evening. With Jesus, Peter, James and John coming from the mountain, looking to join back with the others.

And it's here, with this context in place, that we're ready to move on to our first point this evening. Which is a public lament.

In verse 14, we are told that Jesus and the others are met by a crowd. And as they come to the crowd, a father comes up to Jesus and falls on his knees in desperation.

And he says, Here we have a father who's at the end of himself.

[3 : 38] And here we have a son who's in a desperate state. The father's son has a demon. And that demon sends him into convulsions, throwing him into the flames to be burned, or in the water to be drowned.

And it's a dark, heavy picture that Matthew paints for us. It's amazing the contrast that only a couple verses can bring. We've gone from the splendor of the mountaintop to the darkness of the valley below.

But just when we thought it couldn't get much worse, look what else the father says at the end. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.

The father had come to the people he thought could help. Jesus' very own disciples. But they'd done nothing but fail him. But notice, just because Jesus' followers had failed him, it doesn't stop him coming to Jesus.

He doesn't think, well, his followers did nothing but fail me, so Jesus can't be much better. No, not at all. If anything, it gives him more reason to come near to Jesus.

[4 : 54] It gives him more reason to fall on his knees before him and say, Lord, have mercy. It's important to note in passing that we shouldn't let the failings of other Christians drive us away from Jesus and make us doubt him.

Because I'm sure we've all had experience, or we can all think of instances when other Christians have let us down. Whether that be the fall of a minister or the failings of a close friend, we've all got examples that we can point to.

But friends, here we see that the failings of others should not drive us away from Jesus, but instead drive us to him.

Drive us to him and remind us of our utter need of him. Don't let the inconsistencies and failings of others stop you from coming to the only one who can help.

But now, look down with me to Jesus' response in verse 17. Oh, faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you?

[6 : 06] How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me. Heavy words, aren't they? Heavy words for a heavy picture.

Now, on first reading, these words can sound a bit out of place. It's not the common response we're used to hearing from Jesus. If we're being totally honest, when we hear these words, we think, that's a bit harsh, is it not?

I mean, a needy father comes to Jesus, and this is a response he gets? What's that about? But dear friends, let's make sure one thing is crystal clear in our minds about Jesus.

Jesus is never harsh. Jesus is only ever truthful. So we need to ask ourselves, what is Jesus seeing here that we aren't appreciating?

Well, to begin with, Jesus here is lamenting an entire generation. He's not just pointing to the dad. He's not just pointing to the disciples. But what he is doing is summing up a whole generation with just two words.

[7 : 13] Faithless and twisted. This is an accurate description of the people of that day. They were faithless and twisted.

This is a generation that we have seen Jesus interact with for the last 17 chapters through all his signs and miracles. But yet it's also a generation we have seen continue in unbelief.

And a generation that we will ultimately see nail him to a cross. In Jesus' lament, I believe we hear echoes that take us back to the Old Testament.

Each time Jesus sums up this generation, he's making the point clear. That this generation is just like God's people in the Old Testament that rejected him time and time again.

To show this, just think back to the reading we read at the start of the service. Where God tells Moses to write down a song. A memorable song.

[8 : 16] That is going to be a witness against the people of Israel. Which has this in the first opening verses. They have dealt corruptly with him. They are no longer his children because they are blemished.

They are a crooked and twisted generation. Words that rung true then of the people of that day. And words echoed here by Jesus to the generation before him.

A generation that had seen the signs. A generation that had listened to his words. A generation that persisted in unbelief.

I wonder if that describes you here this evening. Not those of you who have only just started hearing about Jesus. But those of you who have sat in church for years.

You've heard the words of Jesus more times than you can count. And yet you continue in unbelief. You'd never call yourself faithless. And you're definitely not twisted.

[9 : 19] You just say you're neutral. After all, that's a safe place to be, right? Well, no. It's not. You might not want to belong to any side.

But the truth is, if you're here tonight. And you've heard the gospel time and time again. And yet you continue in unbelief. Then you belong to a faithless and twisted generation.

That's what a neutral heart looks like. Because by nature, we are all faithless and twisted. So my friend, I ask you.

How long? How long will you continue in unbelief? How long will you reject Jesus as your Lord and King? How long will you?

How long will you? How long will you? How long will you? But finally, notice with me how Jesus ends his lament. He ends it with, bring him here. Bring the boy to me.

[10:22] He doesn't leave the man in his need, but does for the man what the disciples failed to do. The man cried out, Lord, have mercy. Mercy like us all that he did not deserve, but mercy this man receives.

Because anyone who comes to Jesus for mercy will be sure to find it. Mercy is what was undeservedly asked for, and mercy is what was given.

So if you're here tonight, recognizing you have a faithless and twisted heart, then come to Jesus. Ask him for mercy, and mercy is exactly what you will receive.

Just look down at verse 18. Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. So, we have just heard Jesus' public lament to a faithless generation, but now the focus changes, as we're taken away from the crowd to hear Jesus address his little faith disciples. It's now no longer a generation that's in view, but Jesus' followers. So, point two this evening, a private question and answer.

[11:43] Verse 19. Then disciples came to Jesus privately and said, Why could we not cast it out? Now, to be fair to disciples, that's a great question.

Because in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus had given them the authority to do what they had just failed to do. Chapter 10, verse 1 reads this. And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction.

The disciples had been given the authority by Jesus to cast out demons. And most likely, this wouldn't have been the first demon they had faced. They would have done it many times before with great success.

But here, here they're left powerless. So, they come to Jesus and they ask him, Jesus, why couldn't we do what you had given us the authority to do?

Why couldn't we do it, Jesus? That's the question the disciples asked Jesus. Look down with me to Jesus' response. Verse 20. He said to them, Because of your little faith.

[12:57] Now, stop there. Here, Jesus gives a reason for the disciples' failure. They come asking, Jesus, why couldn't we do what you had given us the authority to do? And Jesus says, Because of your little faith.

What does it look like for the disciples to have little faith in this moment? Well, that's a great question. And a great question that really lies at the heart of this passage. Because we need to understand the problem before we can go to the cure.

Now, what it looks like for the disciples to have little faith in this moment, I believe can be summarized under two headings. It's a faith that's self-reliant.

And it's a faith in a small Savior. So, firstly, little faith is self-reliant. We see this in the way the disciples come to Jesus and ask him the question, Why could we not cast it out?

It's subtle, but debilitating. You see, the focus for the disciples is on themselves. Why couldn't we? After all, we have the power.

[14:10] We have the authority. So, when they're left unable to do it, they're left doubting themselves. The disciples here don't seem to be reflecting the dependence that they should.

Instead, they sound self-reliant. It seems that they've let the gift and authority Jesus has given them fill them with self-confidence.

Here, the disciples are gifted. Gifted by Jesus himself. But that's led to them becoming self-confident and self-reliant. The gift has stopped being seen as a gift.

And rather, it's seen as their own power and ability. You see the subtle shift from dependence to self-reliance? And if you need more convincing, just look at the start of chapter 18, where you see the question the disciples later ask Jesus.

They ask him, Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That's what's on their minds. And isn't that what you'd expect from a group of very gifted, but very self-reliant men?

[15:19] The question of, Who's better? Me or him? Brothers and sisters, let us learn from this. Because we can so quickly mirror it.

We can so quickly go from being dependent to being self-reliant. And we can so quickly take the giftings that God has given us and treat them like they're our own powers and abilities.

And when we do that, friends, we can be sure of this, that in kingdom work, with an attitude like that, failure will soon come our way.

Just like the disciples, we will find ourselves being unable to carry out the tasks we've been gifted with the abilities to carry out. So, the disciples' faith is self-reliant, but it's also in a small Savior. Small Savior? What on earth does that mean? Well, let me explain. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we have been watching the disciples gradually grow in their understanding and appreciation of who Jesus is.

[16:30] Often when we read the Gospels, we assume that the disciples had everything figured out straight away. But we have seen that that is not the case. Jesus gradually revealed himself to them.

And we've seen the disciples being painfully slow to catch on at times. But a couple weeks ago, we saw in chapter 16, the great high point when Peter, on behalf of the others, confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And at that moment, we're like, yes, finally. It's all clicked into place for them. They know who Jesus is. Jesus is God's Son, come to save God's people and establish God's kingdom.

Great. All on the same page then. Well, not exactly. The disciples might be clear on who Jesus is, but they aren't so clear on what he's come to do or how he's come to do it.

We saw this from Peter's reaction when Jesus tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to be killed and on the third day be raised. Peter takes him aside and basically says, not a chance.

[17:42] That's not a part of the plan. You see, the disciples might know who Jesus is, but they still can't accept his mission. So put all this together and you get disciples who have little faith, self-reliant faith, and a lesser savior.

And what do we see that leads to? Well, failure. With the disciples being unable to do what they have been called to do. So, with all that in mind, the question is then, what kind of faith should the disciples have had?

I mean, that's a big question, right? Well, Jesus goes on in his answer. Look down with me to verses 20 and 21. Verse 20. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you.

Here we come to our picture frame verses. But what is Jesus saying here? Well, he's saying, disciples, you had little faith when you should have had faith like a grain of mustard seed.

Now, these verses might look good on a fridge magnet, but here they come as a complete surprise. Because it's not what we expect Jesus to say. Here is it. I mean, the disciples have failed rather publicly, failing to do what they've been called to do.

[19:16] And Jesus just told them that their issue was their little faith. So, as he goes on to tell them what kind of faith they should have, we expect Jesus to pick something pretty big, right?

I mean, something real big and heavy to show the disciples how much faith they should have had. But he doesn't. He doesn't put a heavy boulder in the hands of the disciples.

He puts a seat, a tiny seat, and says, that's what your faith should have been like. It shatters our expectation to pieces, doesn't it?

Because when we think of faith, we become fixated on the amount, the size, the quantity. We think for us to accomplish anything in the Christian life, we need to conjure up more and more faith, as if we could ever measure it in the first place.

We start despairing, don't we? We start spiraling. We start thinking, okay, how much have I got to have? How much do I need to try and to start to conjure up?

[20:24] And here it's like Jesus gets to us just before we start spiraling and places a mustard seed in our hands and says, that's what your faith should be like. We expect a boulder, but instead are given a tiny seat.

Now, what it looks like to have mustard seed faith, I believe can be summarized in this sentence. Mustard seed faith is small faith in a big Savior.

You see, when it comes to faith, the important thing is the object of our faith, not the quantity of the faith itself. And the mustard seed image paints that powerfully and beautifully.

If the problem was the disciples' amount of faith, then we would have been given a boulder instead of a mustard seed. What the problem for the disciples was, was the object of their faith.

They had boulder-sized faith in themselves and still hadn't come to understand, still yet hadn't come to understand or accept Jesus' death and resurrection. We see this, don't we, in the verses that follow.

[21 : 35] What comes just after this private question and answer? Well, Jesus sits the disciples down and tells them again that he's going to be killed, but on the third day be raised again.

And the disciples still don't accept it. They react by being greatly distressed. Verse 23. The disciples have accepted who Jesus is, but still can't accept his death and resurrection.

For them, it doesn't fit into their plan of how the Messiah should save God's people and establish God's kingdom. They were still expecting Jesus to fit in with their plans and their agenda.

So for them to have faith, like a grain of mustard seed, was to have small faith, but in a big Savior. A Savior who come to lay down his life for his people and a Savior who would rise again on the third day.

Even the tiniest of faith in who Jesus is and what he's come to do can expect the impossible to be done. That's the big takeaway from these famous verses.

[22 : 42] Brothers and sisters, when our faith is in Jesus and who he is and his death and resurrection, we can expect the impossible to be done in kingdom work.

That's the mountains we can expect to be moved. Not literal mountains. We're not to go away from these verses and head straight for Ben Nevis and say, oi, shift it.

No, that's not what these verses are saying. We can't expect to start moving the Monroes around. But what we can expect is to see those who are spiritually dead be made alive.

To see souls be saved. To see lives being changed. And we can expect the seemingly impossible to be done in kingdom work. But if you're sitting here tonight and you're not yet a Christian, maybe you've heard the call to put your faith and trust in Jesus and his death and resurrection.

And as you sit there, you doubt whether you could ever have enough faith. Maybe the question in your heart this evening is, how can I ever know I believed enough? How can I ever know I have enough faith?

[23 : 54] Well, let me encourage you. Just look to the mustard seed. The tiny, fragile mustard seed. A faith that size and a crucified and risen Savior is what counts.

Stop focusing inwards and look to Jesus. Look to Jesus, who came from heaven and went to the cross to pay for your sin and was raised so that you could be made right with God.

The smallest faith in that leads to a life being changed. But for those of us who are Christians here this evening, hopefully we can see now at the end of taking these famous verses and putting them back into their proper context, what these famous verses are definitely not saying.

They aren't to be used as a battering ram. They aren't to bash people over the head about their lack of faith. Lots of people out there will take these verses and twist them to make them say all sorts of destructive things.

If you just had more faith, then you wouldn't have lost your job. If you just had more faith, then you wouldn't have got that illness. If you just had more faith, then your bank balance would be bigger.

[25 : 13] It's unbiblical, but it's destructively believable. So brothers and sisters, we need to be on our guard against it. But finally, not also do we need to be on our guard.

We need also to be emboldened. Emboldened to go forward. Forward with confidence, not in ourselves, but in Jesus. Knowing that just the smallest faith in Him can lead to the impossible being done in kingdom work.

Let's expect mountains to be moved. Let's expect souls to be saved. And let's expect obstacles to be moved for the advancement of the gospel.

Not done in our power, but all. All done in His. Let us now pray together in closing. Amen. Dearest Father, thank you for your words, and thank you for your spirit who makes it come alive to us.

Lord, I pray you would make us men and women, boys and girls, who have faith in Jesus and His death and resurrection. And Lord, would we go forward confident, not in our power, but His.

[26 : 32] Knowing that even the smallest faith in Him can expect the impossible to be done in kingdom work. Lord, embolden us and grow us in our confidence and dependence upon you.

Lord, I pray for anyone here tonight who does not yet know you. Lord, would this be the night that they cry out to you and say, Lord, have mercy. And thank you, mercy is exactly what they will receive.

Would you now again, by your spirit, enable us to praise you not only from our mouths, but more importantly, from our hearts. All for your glory and for our good.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Our final singing.