

Belief and Unbelief Mixed (17:14-18)

The Snare of the Devil (17:14-16)

17:14 When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, 17:15 “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic¹ and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 17:16 I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.”

- “Lord, have mercy” (9:27; 15:22; 20:30).
- We are reminded of the necessity of the older praying for and interceding for the younger.
- This young man’s situation is illustrative of the state of unbelieving humanity: they are caught in “the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:26; see also 2 Corinthians 4:3-4).
- The disciples were given authority to cast out demons in 10:1-8. It seems, however, that this authority was conditional on the disciples exercising it by faith in the Source of the authority (Jesus).

This Broken World (17:17-18)

17:17 And Jesus answered and said, “You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you [plural]? How long shall I put up with you [plural]? Bring [plural] him here to Me.” 17:18 And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once.

- In Mark’s account, the father cries out, “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

¹ “Lunatic” translates the Greek verb σεληνιάζεται, from the Greek word for “moon” (σελήνη). The English word “lunatic” follows this pattern, being derived from “Luna,” another name for our moon. Some English translations describe this with the words “seizures” or even “epileptic,” but that ignores the demonic nature given in the context (plus, there’s no evidence that this word was used to describe epilepsy at this time in history).

- Jesus’ outburst is not directed at the man, but at the “generation” (see also 11:16; 12:39,41-42,45; 16:4; 23:34-36).
- Jesus’ description of that generation is an echo of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:5,20).
- The Gospel of Matthew has connected healing with the faith of those seeking deliverance (8:13; 9:22,28-29; 15:28), and a lack of miracles connected to a lack of faith (13:58).

Little Faith: Not Relying on Jesus (17:19-21)

Not Even a Mustard Seed (17:19-20)

17:19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” 17:20 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.”

- This is the focus of the narrative; this failure on the part of the disciples was to be instructive to them.
- Jesus has chastised their “little faith” before this (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). It seems that their faith isn’t even as big as a mustard seed!
- Mountain-moving faith will be part of Jesus’ teaching later, as well (21:21).
- We may have the calling of God and the equipping of God, but none of those things replace the necessity of faith-reliance on God in Christ to carry out what He has called and equipped us to do.
- Biblical faith is not vague; nor is it based on our desires or imaginations. Biblical faith is “a firm assent to, a compliance with, and a confidence in, all divine revelation” (Matthew Henry). In other words, we are to believe and live in accordance with what has been promised and commanded in Scripture. To say it another way, biblical faith is not based on our

desires, but God's promises in Christ recorded in Scripture.

Self-Denial and Spiritual Warfare (17:21)

17:21["But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."]²

- Jesus taught on “*prayer and fasting*” (in that order) in 6:5-18.
- Both “*prayer and fasting*” point to a self-humbling faith, seeking God to work according to His power and will. Prayer and fasting, rightly carried out in a disciple’s life, are not self-efforts to manipulate God, but a humble requesting for God to work.

Little Faith: Not Believing Jesus’ Words (17:22-23)

17:22And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; 17:23and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved.

- There is a word-play here: “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men...*”
- Despite the fact that Jesus has specifically mentioned His being “*raised*” (16:21; 17:23; see also 20:19; 26:32), the disciples are still “*deeply grieved*.” This may underline their “*little faith*” (17:20), which was illustrated in the previous narrative.

² Early manuscripts of Matthew do not have this verse; if it is not original, it could have been added from Mark 9:29. In modern translations, this verse is bracketed or footnoted. Some people will cite verses like Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19 to criticize modern translations from “taking away” verses; it should be noted that it’s also a sin to “add to” the Scriptures! Modern translations are not part of some satanic conspiracy theory – this is a case of using the best of the ancient manuscript witnesses to give us the most accurate translations possible.