

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 17. It was Christmastime in 2022 when we first began our journey through Matthew. I shared that it was my desire to walk through this entire book together. And I also shared that I had no idea how long it might take. Well, it's taken 3 ½ years and 55 sermons to get to this point, but we're making progress! And Lord willing, my plan is for us to make it through Matthew 25 this year, bringing us right up to Jesus's death and resurrection. There's no question in my mind that giving this much attention to Matthew is worth it. Along with Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew gives us a front row seat to observe the life and ministry of our Savior, leading us into deeper faith and worship. And Matthew also does an outstanding job of showing us how the whole Bible story centers upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Which is why I've titled our series in Matthew, "The Promise Fulfilled."

Because as we read this book, we see that Matthew is determined to show us that every promise of God is *fulfilled* in Jesus. That includes the promise of the kingdom, the rule and reign of God making its way into all the earth. And when you become a citizen of God's kingdom, by pledging your allegiance to Christ the King, that will change everything about your life. It will change your priorities, your definition of greatness, and your relationships with other believers. We'll learn from Jesus about each of these matters over the next three weeks, beginning today with the way life in his kingdom affects our priorities.

Though it's a bit old school, I use a physical planner to organize my workweek. Don't get me wrong, I love my computer, but there is something very satisfying about making a list of tasks and physically checking the boxes with a pen as they get done. And all the type-a people said, "amen." The planner I use has little motivational quotes on the top of the page, meant to inspire productivity and hard work. Some are cheesy, but others are alright. For example, here's the quote that was on the top of the page this Tuesday: "If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will."

Now think about that. In one sense, there's wisdom in those words. If you do not live with intentionality and purpose, if you just drift along, it's not that you won't go anywhere. You'll go where the strongest current takes you. For example, your attention will go wherever your phone's notifications and algorithms take you. Your time will go to what other people demand from you. Your character will conform to your culture or your community, for better or for worse. There's no question, it is far better to live with intentionality than passivity. So, there's some wisdom in saying, "If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will." But there's also a danger. Because if you take that quote to mean you should live with total personal autonomy, living out the spirit of the poem *Invictus*, which famously declares, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul," if you really think no one should prioritize your life other than you, well then you will not follow Christ. Because to follow Jesus is to submit to his Lordship, and to let him set the priorities.

In our passage today, Jesus shows us two key priorities for life in his kingdom. He calls us to live by faith and to live in freedom. Let's take those kingdom priorities one at a time. And see why they are each so vitally important.

1. Live by Faith

There are two main stories in our passage today, and the first is all about faith. I want to walk you through these verses, making a few comments and then drawing out two lessons. Let's pick it up in verses 14-16: *And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him"* (Matthew 17:14-16).

Peter, James, and John have just seen Jesus's glory revealed on a mountaintop. But now they come back down to earth, and they are immediately confronted with some deep darkness. A man kneels before Jesus and asks for mercy. Not for himself, but for his son, his son who suffers terribly from seizures. But this is no mere epilepsy or other physiological illness. This is deeply spiritual: a demonic presence has taken hold of this boy, and this demon is not only causing seizures—which are scary enough, this demon is clearly trying to destroy the boy, by casting him into fire and water.

Every parent who has felt distress over a child trapped in destructive darkness can understand something of this father's pain. He pleads for mercy, and he tells Jesus that he's already asked the disciples to heal his son, but they were not able. How will Jesus respond? Well, look at verses 17-18: *And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly* (Matthew 17:17-18).

Notice Jesus's power. He rebukes the demon, he casts out the darkness, and the boy is healed. Moms. Dads. Are you concerned for a son or daughter trapped in some darkness? Go to Jesus, kneel before him, and ask him for mercy. He has the power to heal your child. And you might say, "I've been doing that!" Well don't stop. Keep praying, and don't lose heart. He does everything according to his perfect will and in his perfect time. But he does have the power to heal your child. And we're to notice his power on display in this story. But we're also to notice his frustration. Before he heals the boy, he cries out... *"O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?"*

As we'll see in a moment, the reason the disciples could not heal the boy was their little faith, which frustrates Jesus. He looks at his disciples, he considers the whole generation, and the faithlessness he finds discourages him. And remember, Jesus was sinless! Which means, there is a way to lament a lack of faith that is entirely appropriate and even righteous. So, the next time you find your heart discouraged by unbelief in your family, in your community, in this world... take heart. Jesus felt that discouragement as well. But having expressed his frustration, Jesus then seeks to help his disciples foster greater faith.

Look at verses 19-20: *Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. 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"* (Matthew 17:19-20).

I love the humility of the disciples here. This man came to them with his demon possessed son. They could not cast the demon out. And they heard how this frustrated Jesus. But instead of cowering in the corner, assuming Jesus must have given up on them, that he was too ashamed of their weakness to have anything else to do with them, they come to him. And they ask him,

“Why couldn’t we do it?” And Jesus doesn’t ignore them or humiliate them. He helps them. He tells them, “It’s your little faith.” And by “little” he’s not referring to the size of their faith, but the substance of their faith. The issue is not that their faith was small. That can’t be the problem, because he tells them that even faith the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain! The issue was the substance of their faith, the character and quality of their faith. They had become too self-sufficient. Other accounts of this story tell us that the disciples did not pray before attempting this exorcism. Which means they thought they could handle it on their own. In other words, their faith had shifted from Jesus to themselves. And that kind of faith is little, weak, and ineffective.

So, let’s draw some lessons from this story. Why is faith a priority for Christ’s kingdom? Well, because...

A. Without faith we cannot please God

Again, in verse 17, Jesus cries out, *O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?* (Matthew 17:17).

Clearly, he is frustrated in this moment. He is not pleased. Because as Hebrews 11:6 tells us, *Without faith it is impossible to please [God]* (Hebrews 11:6). Romans 14:23 says it even stronger, telling us, *For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin* (Romans 14:23).

If you do not have faith, if you are not trusting in Jesus and depending upon him, you cannot please him. It doesn’t matter how hard you are trying to live a good life and to do the right things. I’m sure these disciples tried their best to cast out this demon. But it was ineffective. More than that, it was offensive to God because they tried to handle the situation on their own. And that’s sin. Ignoring God is one way of rebelling against God. And that is why without faith we cannot please God. But, here’s the amazing news:

B. With faith we can move mountains

Look at verse 20 again. Jesus says, *“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”* (Matthew 17:20).

Jesus is not promising that if we believe in him anything we desire will happen. Once when I was a kid, I took this verse, paired it with the story of Peter walking on water, and thought, well, I’d like to do that! So, I tried to walk on the water in the tub. It did not work. Because God hasn’t promised that. No this is not a promise that if we believe in Jesus anything we desire will happen. But it is a promise that if we believe in Jesus—the things we desire can happen! After all, nothing is impossible with God. He can move mountains. He can cast out demons. He can do anything he likes for the glory of his name and the good of his people. So, if we want to be faithful citizens of his kingdom, and see his kingdom advance in our day, through our efforts—we must have faith. We must depend upon him, bowing before him like this desperate father, asking for mercy. And then watching to see what he does.

John Knox was a Scottish minister in the 1500s, who longed to see the kingdom advance in his day, and prayed for it fervently. And the Lord answered. So much so that one of his greatest opponents—Queen Mary—reportedly once said, “I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe.”

Brothers and sisters, let's pursue greater faith, leading to increasing prayer, for the advance of Christ's kingdom in our day. Let's live by faith. That's a priority for Christ's people. And so is living in freedom.

2. Live in Freedom

The second major story in our passage comes in verses 24-27. Again, I'd like to walk through the story and then highlight two takeaways. I don't think I've ever taught on or preached on these verses. On first read they're kind of strange. But there's a wonderful encouragement and an important application here. Let's pick it up in verse 24: *When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"* (Matthew 17:24).

Ben Franklin once famously said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Well, the world never changes. And here come the tax collectors, with a question for Peter. They want to know if Jesus pays the two-drachma tax. The two-drachma tax was a religious tax, paid to support the ministry of the temple. Two drachmas was roughly equivalent to two days' wages, so it's not a ton of money. In our context, this tax was a couple hundred bucks. It was certainly not the largest tax in Jesus's day. But here's where things get interesting.

In the 1st century, different religious groups held different views on the two-drachma tax. For example, the Pharisees demanded people pay the tax annually. But the Sadducees refused to pay it. And members of the Qumran community only paid it once in their lives.¹ So, that means this question has less to do with whether Jesus is paying his taxes, and more to do with what tribe he belongs to. Which box does he fit in? It's a sort of religious litmus test. And given that these men are collectors of the tax, they clearly agree with the tax. So, their question is, does Jesus agree with us? Peter says, "Yes." But then listen to what happens next.

Verses 25-26: *He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free"* (Matthew 17:25-26).

In our modern democratic society, where we know our leaders and their families are supposed to pay our taxes, this may ruffle a few feathers. But Jesus is simply stating a human tendency and a historic reality. If you're the son of the king, you probably won't pay the same tolls or taxes as everyone else. It's a privilege that goes along with your status. The son experiences freedom because of his father. Now, remember, the tax in question here is a temple tax and the temple belongs to God. No one would tax God and ask him to pay for his temple. And no one would tax God's Son either. So, here's Jesus's point: He doesn't need to pay the temple tax, because he is the Son of God. He is free in this regard.

However, Jesus says in verse 27, "not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself" (Matthew 17:27).

This is awesome. Jesus tells Peter, "I don't need to pay the tax. But here's what we'll do." "Go to

¹ R.T. France

the sea, catch a fish, and you'll find a shekel inside (worth 4 drachmas—enough for two people). Take it and pay for us both.” Only Jesus could do this. It's a powerful display of his divinity. To know a fish with a shekel in its belly exists, and to guarantee that Peter will catch that fish immediately. This is omniscience and omnipotence. This is the Son of God revealing his divine nature, and I love it. But I also love the reason for it. He doesn't need to pay the tax, but he does it anyway to avoid giving an unnecessary offense. So, here are two takeaways for us today. First...

A. God's children are free

In verse 26 Jesus says ...*the sons are free* (Matthew 17:26).

When you believe in Jesus, you become one of God's children, united with his Son. Therefore, you enjoy all the freedom of this status. That of course includes freedom from condemnation, because the Son of God takes away the guilt of our sin and covers us in the glories of his own righteousness. But it also includes freedom from many of people's expectations, including the expectation to conform to certain practices, rituals, and traditions that are not commanded in Scripture but become tribal markers like this two-drachma tax in the 1st century.

We have our own religious litmus tests today, matters of secondary importance that unnecessarily divide Christians. Like the style of music in your worship services, or the way you choose to educate your children, or the way you engage (or don't engage) in various political and cultural issues. Like the Pharisees in the 1st century, we can make the mistake of adding to God's law certain standards and practices that he has not required for faithfulness. But when we feel that pressure from others, we can rejoice in remembering that as God's children, we are free from all of that! We have one Lord, we have one Judge, and his name is Jesus. God's children are free. At the same time—and this is so important—Jesus is also reminding us in this story that...

B. God's children are not free to offend

Jesus didn't have to pay the tax. God did not require that. *However*, he said in verse 27, *not to give offense to them...*

Go, get the fish, and pay the tax. There was nothing inherently wrong with paying the tax. And though he did not need to pay it, Jesus did it anyway. Because in love, he longed to draw people to himself, not to unnecessarily push them away. And as his people, we want to walk in the same way. The gospel is offensive enough. Telling people that they are sinners in need of a Savior, and that Jesus alone saves is not an easy message for many people to hear. We don't need to add any offense. We want to do all we can to draw people to Christ and not unnecessarily push them away. This is why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19, *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them* (1 Corinthians 9:19).

He's saying, "Look, I know that in Christ I am free from everyone's demands except the Lord's. However, I will not rub my freedom in someone else's face. No, I'll willingly set aside my preferences and even my rights." "And I'll do this," Paul says, "That I might win more of them. That I might lead more to Christ." This is not a call to weaken our grip on the truth, or to soften our stance on sin. But it is a call to love, to love sacrificially by avoiding unnecessary offense so that we might win more for Christ.

I wonder how that might impact the things we post online. I wonder how that might direct the topics of our conversations at school, in the office, around the lunch table this Mother's Day. I wonder how that might help us keep preferences from becoming convictions that would cause us to cast judgment on others who disagree. It would be wise to ask yourself: Is there any way that I am adding a hindrance to the gospel which would keep people away?

Conclusion

So, here are two kingdom priorities: faith and freedom. Without faith we cannot please God, but with faith we can move mountains. And God's children are free, but we are not free to offend. Jesus is telling us: Live by faith and live in freedom. And in this last moment: let me remind you what we believe and where this freedom is found.

Verses 22-23: As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed (Matthew 17:22-23).

Jesus died and rose again to free us from the penalty of sin and the fear of death. So, friend, believe in Jesus. For if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.