

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶ And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰ 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." ²¹ ²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed. ²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" ²⁵ 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?" ²⁶ And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷ However, 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" (Mat 17.14-27).

Introduction

What is the appropriate textual unit for the passage that begins with Matthew 17.14? Chapter 18 definitely begins a new "great speech" of Jesus like the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7), the sending speech (Mat 10), and the record of the parables (Mat 13). Although this new speech has more dialogue than the earlier ones, it still shows a marked transition in the narrative. Therefore, our textual unit could extend from verse 14 to the end of chapter 17, but are the paragraphs (or episodes) here unified in some way?

In these paragraphs, what we have are the healing of the epileptic boy (17.14-21), the second prediction of death and resurrection (17.22-23), and the temple tax (17.24-27). At first, the paragraphs seem disparate; they seem like unconnected fragments just thrown together. The announcement of His coming death appears just to hang by itself in midair sandwiched between two miracles (the miracle of healing on one side, and the miracle of the fish with a coin in its mouth on the other side). Therefore, what we will do today is first survey the account looking for unity, and then we will draw out lessons from the account in terms of its unity. To capture things as a whole, the title is "Training in faith, grief, and love."

1A. A survey of the account looking for unity

We can follow the events by considering the first miracle, the middle of the sandwich, and the second miracle.

1) The first miracle

After the glory of the mount of transfiguration, Jesus and His disciples joined themselves to a crowd of people (17.14a). Immediately, a man approached Jesus, knelt before Him, and begged Him for mercy for his son. The afflicted son suffered greatly with seizures that threatened his life (17.15). The entire scene is one of confusion and human inadequacy. They descended from the brightness of the mountaintop to the dimness of the valley (cf. how Raphael, 1483-1521, caught this contrast in his last painting, *The Transfiguration*).

The text does not tell us much about the man, his son, the miracle, or even about demon oppression that caused this illness (17.18, by a rebuke, Jesus drove the demon out and healed the boy "from that moment").

Thus, the interest of the narrator is not in the healing as such, but with something else. Matthew's concern is with the helplessness of the disciples to drive out the evil spirit. Thus, the man ends his request by stating "I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him" (17.16).

At this point in the story, Jesus gives a rebuke of "this generation" (**O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?**). There is an echo here of Moses

rebuking Israel as a perverse and crooked generation. Jesus is the long expected prophet like Moses (Deut 18), the coming prophet who likewise preached to a perverse and crooked generation. Jesus draws language from Deuteronomy 32, which must help us understand Matthew 17 because Jesus is “the greater than Moses” just as He is greater than the temple (cf. Mat 12.6). Note some of the sins of the people in Moses’ day and our Lord’s day.

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. ² May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. ³ For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! ⁴ "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. ⁵ They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. ⁶ Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? ⁷ Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. ⁸ When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. ⁹ But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. ¹⁰ "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. ¹¹ Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, ¹² the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. ¹³ He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. ¹⁴ Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat- and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape. ¹⁵ "But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. ¹⁶ They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. ¹⁷ They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. ¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. ¹⁹ "The LORD saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. ²⁰ And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, For they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness (Deu 32.1-20).

Jesus somehow implicates the disciples in this crookedness, but surely the main target of His rebuke is the unmindful and unfaithful covenant people represented here in the confusion and human weakness driven by demonic oppression.

The self-control of Jesus is strained and taxed; the people, and to a degree the disciples among them, are an increasing burden to Him (Ridderbos). He feels a strong sense of frustration, saying, **how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?** His patience is reaching its limits. This is a revealing picture of Jesus in His true and full humanity. Probably, a good way to understand it is to think of the frustration He feels in relation to righteous anger. His patience is running out and He is on the verge of responding in righteous anger. He is close to finding a whip to beat the tar out of these people. Different from Moses, Jesus does not complain against the Father. He rebukes the covenant people (disciples among them) as He faithfully continues to fulfill His mission by performing the miracle; He gives the gospel sign of restoration from all the effects of the fall including demonic deception and oppression. From other accounts, we know that demonic oppression made this boy deaf and mute. He could not hear kingdom truth with his ears or give praise to God with his lips, but Jesus healed him instantly. This is good news in the silence of sin in which afflicted sinners do not hear God’s speech or confess His name.

Thus, when the disciples ask why they were helpless to perform the miracle, Jesus continues to fulfill His mission by training them in faith. He speaks of their faith as something little, but something that can, and eventually will, accomplish much. **Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰ 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" (Mat 17.19-21).** To remove mountains means to overcome great difficulties. Jesus seems to say that they could not do this miracle because of their little faith (tainted by the perversion of the wayward covenant people who are no longer children of God). At the same time, He tells them that by that mustard like little faith they can move mountains.

2) The middle of the sandwich

“Gathering” (17.22) suggests a special assembly that met in anticipation of the journey to Jerusalem (cf. 19.1; 20.17-19; 21.1).

Looking ahead to this journey, Jesus predicts His death and resurrection as He puts more pieces of the puzzle in place. He is training the disciples who are not yet ready for their work, but Jesus is preparing them by forewarnings and instructions. He emphasizes certainty here not necessity as before (Mat 16.21f) though that has to lie below the surface of the *deliverance into* the hands of men. A biting dimension of His suffering is betrayal. By betrayal, He will be the prey and plaything of men. The disciples get this part of the message. They are not ready to absorb the reality of the resurrection yet, so they can only hear the negative, and this fills them with grief. What is going on here? In a word, Jesus schools the disciples in grief; their distress is part of His schooling.

3) The second miracle

The temple tax and fish miracle follow next.

A tax collector spoke to Peter about the temple tax (time references indicate that this is about a month before the Passover, cf. France, *Matthew*, 268). Based on Exodus 30.11-16, this tax was for the upkeep of the temple. There were different views on how to apply it in Jesus’ day. Some believed that all adult males had to pay the tax; others disapproved of the tax. So, again, people ask Jesus for His view. In this context, no faultfinding is evident. It becomes a more or less private discussion with Peter. There are lessons here for Peter and per this record for us as well.

Jesus anticipated Peter on the subject of the temple tax, showing His supreme knowledge as Son of God and Son of man. **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?”** ²⁶ **And when he said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free (Mat 17.25-26).** He taught Peter that the temple tax did not obligate Him. He used the illustration of how kings excuse their sons from taxes in their kingdoms. Sons in the house do not have to pay taxes, Jesus is the Son in the Father’s temple-house, and therefore, Jesus is not under obligation to pay a temple-house tax. He has no obligation to pay a temple tax because the temple is His Father’s house (again cf. *His Father; my Father*).

There is a lesson here in logical argument in how Jesus leaves the application of the illustration to us to make. He simply ends with **“then the sons are free.”** This is a suppressed argument that leaves parts of the reasoning out of view to make the listener think. The method forces us to draw out inferences. To get the point, we have to reason that the temple is the Father’s kingdom-house, Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way and, therefore, He is free. In addition, we have to pick up the implication intuitively that being free means “not under obligation to pay the temple tax.”

Still, to avoid offending people, He pays the tax. This fact should interest us. Jesus conducts Himself in such a way as to avoid offense that would unnecessarily prejudice people against His mission. Jesus was sharp at times in His teaching; He did not avoid all possibilities of people being offended. Here, the matter of an OT ritual law related to temple worship, and how contemporary Israel applied it, is secondary to the needless offence that practicing His freedom from the duty would cause. Temple worship will drastically change soon; now it is premature to challenge a detail of that ritual system, and it serves no good purpose to assert His freedom from obligation. To be clear, He does teach His freedom and hints at the big changes to come, but it is unnecessary to practice His freedom in front of the tax collectors and others. He asserts His freedom in order to teach the disciples; He teaches about His freedom at the same time that He does not exercise it.

It is interesting to observe how Jesus pays the tax. He pays by means of the miracle of a fish with a coin in its mouth. He tells Peter to go fishing; Peter goes and snags a fish that has a coin in its mouth. The coin will cover the tax for both Jesus and Peter. They pay their taxes by

going fishing. A fish pays the tax. Evidently, only Peter sees the miracle. Now we see it by means of the Gospel record.

What are the lessons of the temple tax and fish miracle? How do these accounts work together (14-27 as a unit)? Let us now turn to the lessons from the account.

2A. Lessons from the account in terms of its unity

There are three lessons; they pertain to faith, grief, and love.

1) The greatness of little faith

How do we understand this? In part, it is an example of having a gift (job, vocation, calling, and task) but being unable to perform it because of a lack of faith. In part, the lesson is that little prayer indicates little faith. Mark's emphasis is that the disciples can only accomplish this task by prayer (9.29, **this cannot be driven out by anything but prayer**; note that Mat 17.21 is a variant reading).

The disciples failed because of little faith, even though all it takes is a little mustard seed of faith to serve the Lord in obedience. In other words, one meaning of "little faith" is faithlessness, faith-less neglect of prayer and dependence on God through the means of prayer. Faith is not simply assenting to the truth of something in the mind or feeling justified in a belief; it is commitment to God, reliance, and entrusting of oneself to the Lord; it is a matter of dependent prayer as a way of life.

We need to distinguish between bad little faith and good little faith.

Bad little faith has the character of the faithlessness of old Israel. The speech of Moses that Jesus adopted (Deut 32) can help us understand bad little faith. The covenant people were senseless, foolish, perverse, and crooked. They had blemishes. They forgot the Lord and His faithfulness. They were not good at covenant remembering (cf. being good at communion remembering today). They forsook the Lord substituting other gods.

Good little faith, like a mustard seed, is great faith. Even if we have little faith, we have access to the Father in heaven. By His blessing, there is great power in our faith to overcome insurmountable obstacles. Thus, little faith mixed with prayer is powerful.

Furthermore, there must be a lesson here in what is truly important for the life of the church beyond the apostolic age. A helpful passage in this regard is Luke 10.17-24. (¹⁷ **The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"** ¹⁸ **And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."** ²¹ **In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."** ²³ **Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴ For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it").** Having God's blessing on your eyes and ears (Lk 10.23) is superior to having power over evil spirits; having your name written in heaven is the real cause for joy, not being a miracle-worker. Thus good little faith is not only dependent praying faith, but it is heavenly-minded faith. *In other words, good little faith is faith that depends on Christ for salvation and that clings to Him personally.* Then you say, amen, "my name is written in heaven" or looking at the cross you say, "My name is written on His hands."

Fundamentally then, little faith that is good is faith that leads to persistent prayer (little faith is big on prayer). Furthermore, good little faith personally appropriates Christ as risen Lord. This is more important than any miracle-working gift, and in the end, the miracle-working gifts lead us to the primacy of the saving word of Christ. That leaves the special word gifts in a subordinate place. In the end, this leads to *sola scriptura* as the big foundation of little faith.

2) The schoolhouse of grief

The Lord often deems it necessary to bring us into the schoolhouse of grief in the process of teaching us His will. Grief is often due to ignorance of the ways of God, wrong expectations,

and lack of submission to His will. In His loving purposes, our Savior will often bring His disciples to grief in order to take them by the hand and lead them to new levels of understanding and obedience. The disciples grieved about the journey to Jerusalem and the suffering awaiting Christ through betrayal there. However, grief left a lasting impression on them; His prediction rested in their thoughts like seeds in the ground. The fact of betrayal is there clearly, and the fact of resurrection is there dimly. Later, they will gain better focus on the content of their grief, and then they will hear what they do not now hear: betrayal *and resurrection*.

Betrayal by deception (Judas) and disloyalty (friends through fear his cause disowning) was part of the humiliation of Christ. These things were part of His suffering. We may face similar things in our experience. If so, we cannot complain, but must submit ourselves to God following our Lord's example and sharing in His suffering, as we walk in His steps.

In the end, an important lesson here is that when the Lord brings us to grief (and it does come from His hand), He does so with good purpose for our edification, for our good. With this perspective in mind, we can take heart knowing that the grief comes to us with promise. We know that behind a frowning providence, God hides a smiling face. The schoolhouse of grief is a microcosm of Romans 8.28.

3) Voluntary acts of love

Sometimes, love and service doing the will of God calls us to do things that we do not have to do (that we are not required to do; but we do them for one another in love for the Savior). This is using our freedom, or rather, not using it, for love's sake. Paul was free from OT vows, but he made some to avoid offense. He was free from circumcision, but he practiced it with regard to Timothy for love's sake. Love for others will constrain us, if we follow our Lord's example, to do things we would otherwise not do being free from them. We do them out of love, not because of a specific command of God regarding them directly. We do some things others want us to do, or expect of us, based on the general and all-important command of God to love one another as He loved us.

We may and should often do things that are not directly required of us by the Father, but that are required by love to avoid offending and to promote the gospel. For example, I believe that I am free from the command to include infants in the covenant sign. Nevertheless, I would perform an infant baptism if the conditions of love, unity, and respect for the consciences of the Christian family required it. Freedom from obligation to God's ritual laws does not free us from obligation to love and promote the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This spirit and mindset led Paul to circumcise Timothy and to make a Jewish vow. He was free from both, but he did both out of love rooted in the example of Christ. Thus, he says, **for you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another** (Gal 5.13). We tend to do much study on difficult nuances of theology, but we should also do much study on difficult nuances of serving one another through love.

Conclusion

Jesus teaches us about how he trains His disciples, then and now (them and us).

1) Little faith that is praying faith accomplishes much in God's kingdom in the battle against demonic deception. He thus calls us to diligent prayer.

2) Grief brings with it the promise of greater kingdom service; it is a stepping-stone. God gives it to take us a notch higher in our walk with Him. Jesus encourages us in our grief and leads us by the hand to hopeful expectation as we journey with Him to the heavenly Jerusalem.

3) Freedom is ours in Christ, but if we follow His example, we will voluntarily use our freedom (not use it) in loving service to others. This is His new and great commandment that He bonds together with faith and hope. Thus, Jesus calls us to follow His example of faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love. **To Him be all glory and praise, now and forevermore. To Him belongs all glory by how we love one another as he loved us., amen.**