

Rocks in the Sandbox

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Matthew 17:14-20

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A little boy was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. He had with him his box of cars and trucks, his plastic pail and shovel. In the process of creating roads and tunnels in the soft sand, he discovered a large rock in the middle of the sandbox. He dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt, and struggled to push it across the sandbox. When he got the rock to the edge of the sandbox, however, he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the little wall. Determined, the little boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox. This continued until the boy finally burst into tears. But the boy's father had been watching the whole time. He came to the boy and said, "Son, why didn't you use all the strength that you had available? Defeated, the boy sobbed back, "But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had! "No, son," corrected the father kindly. "You didn't use all the strength you had. You didn't ask me." With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock, and removed it from the sandbox.

The words of this father remind me of the words Jesus spoke one day as His disciples failed at a large task of their own.

Shortly after the transfiguration on the mountain, Jesus, Peter, James and John return to where the rest of the disciples had been waiting. ¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, ¹⁵ "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. ¹⁶ "I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" 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 (Matthew 17:14-20).

Man, are these words harsh. So what did Jesus mean here? Was He scolding His disciples because they didn't take care of this problem while He was away? He gave them the authority to cast out demons way back in chapter 10, so what was different here? Was it really the size of their faith, as we read in verse 20? Perhaps they just lacked confidence in their ability. Maybe they stopped having faith in themselves. Well, to understand this whole Mustard Seed rebuke, we need to understand just what Jesus meant when He pointed to the littleness of their "Faith".

Throughout the Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the disciples seem like an inept group of men that couldn't even decide where to eat, let alone carry on the work which Jesus began. But something happens later on. By the time we get to the Book of Acts, we read about Peter, John, and later Paul and Barnabas healing people and casting out demons. The New Testament often tells of great signs and wonders done by these men. Okay then, let's figure this out. What's one major thing that happened to these men between the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts? Did they spend a great deal of time strengthening their faith and gaining confidence in their abilities? Did they find a spiritual director to help them get in touch with themselves? No. These men were changed when God filled them with His Holy Spirit.

When Peter and John heal a man outside the Temple, they say, "why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness?"¹³ For it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the God of all our ancestors - who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this (Acts 3:12-13). Paul says "And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit."⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). When Peter and John got in trouble with the Jewish authorities for healing a man, Peter knowingly replied, "he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:10). And Paul, who had done such incredible things for our Lord, defers the glory when he says, "but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves." (2 Corinthians 4:7)

This whole “Mustard Seed” faith thing is to remind us to stop relying upon our own power, wisdom, and understanding, and to start placing our faith in He who works through us. It was not a “littleness of faith” in themselves that was the problem, it was the fact that they were trying to accomplish something on their own. To overcome things in this world we must develop a faith in Christ, not in ourselves. For God to do great things, we must empty ourselves and let Him work through us. The kind of faith Jesus was talking about here was a faith that says, “On my own I can accomplish nothing, but with God working through me, there is nothing He cannot do”

It’s impossible for you or me to move a mountain just by saying it is so. We have no power over nature because we ourselves are a part of nature. We too have been created. To have power over nature, we would have to exist outside of nature. And God is the only One who is like this. God is the only one who can move a mountain with the power of a spoken word. So there is no way I will ever develop enough faith in myself to accomplish this. And Jesus knew this. He knew His disciples could never move a mountain with faith in themselves or their own abilities. However, if they had just an ounce of faith in God’s ability to do incredible things through them, then nothing would be impossible.

Oddly enough, most of us still do not have this kind of faith. Most people think that to deepen their faith, they need to become super-spiritual through hours of meditation and solitude. A trend I see now days is to seek out a spiritual director. We become Master Qui-Gon’s Padawon disciple so he can help us get in touch with the faith that is within us. But truthfully, we develop the kind of faith Jesus is talking about when we let go of our own power and wisdom, and anchor our faith securely in Christ.

When faced with an insurmountable task, most Christians will never even try. They figure, “There’s no way it will ever happen”, convinced because it is beyond what they feel is possible, beyond their resources, and beyond and their own skills and abilities. But remember, Christ is not calling us to develop more faith in ourselves. He desires that we have just an ounce of faith that He can do anything. And even if the task God has placed before us is larger and more impossible than we could ever do on our own, our faith and power rests in Him, not in ourselves.