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Matthew 17:14-27

Our Inadequacy, Christ's Sufficiency

If I had to name at least one item that I could pretty much *guarantee* could be found in every single one of our homes, I feel *pretty confident* I could go with: a *mirror*. You would be hard-pressed to find a home or even an apartment without one. And for good reason: they are very helpful inventions! They let us see things *about ourselves* that we would never see on our own. I'm sure we've all had that embarrassing experience where we going about our day as normal, only to be stopped by a friend who informs us, in hushed and discreet tones, that we have bits of lunch stuck rather obtrusively between our two front teeth. We could be completely oblivious to something about us that is *completely obvious* to everyone else around us. It's very easy to see the spinach in *someone else's teeth*, or grease smudge on *someone else's cheek*, but impossible to see it when it's in *our teeth* or on *our cheeks*. And so, as we strive to avoid such embarrassment in the future, we develop the habit of "checking the mirror" periodically, right? Or, maybe you've known the irritation of having an eyelash fall into your eye, or have had a contact dry up and not quite sit right; it's very difficult to try and fix a problem with our eye on our own - after all, you can't see it! - and so, we find a mirror, to help us *see the problem within ourselves* in order to fix it.

And so it is with character flaws and sin. It is all too easy to point out *someone's flaws* - but far too often, we can be completely oblivious to our own. It's all too easy spot our neighbor's gossip or greed, our spouse's judgmentalism or anger, our child's disrespect and disobedience, our coworker's laziness and habit of lying, a leader's selfishness and pride - and yet at the very same time we can be *completely blind to the exact same sins in our lives, infecting and destroying our own hearts*. We become numb and hardened by our sins; we can be completely blind to it. Therefore, we need *a mirror* to expose the sins and failures within us. And that mirror is the Bible - God's Holy, Inspired, and Inerrant Word, that He has revealed to us *for our good*. The Bible reveals to us *who God is*, showing us His standard of love, holiness, righteousness and goodness. And in the process, it also shows us *who we are*, in all our sin, inadequacy, failures, and shortcomings. It holds up before our eyes a *mirror*; exposing the sinfulness of our hearts so that we can see them plainly; when we read the Bible, as believers, God uses His Word to *convict*

us of our particular sins. And yet, God doesn't do this to *condemn us* - no, if we're resting in the gospel of Christ by faith, then we believe that there is *no more condemnation* for us, for Christ has borne the guilt of our sin once and for all! And yet, the sin remains in our hearts; it continues to harden us, lead us down the path of darkness and death, destroying our lives and the lives of those around it; it is continual disobedience and rebellion towards our glorious GOD. And so, God lovingly and graciously *convicts us* by holding up His Word before our eyes - He convicts us of our sin to lead us to *true repentance*, day by day, so that we will be aware of just of desperately dependant we are on Him; just how desperately *needy* we are for the Lord's grace! Just like a good friend acts as a mirror to us, warning us of the spinach in our teeth or the rip in our pants, *for our own good* - so the Lord graciously gives us His Word as a means of exposing and convicting us of our sin and our utter need for Him, day by day.

And I think that's exactly what we see going on in our passage today, **Matthew 17:14-27**. This passage is made up of three smaller sections - and each of these stories seems fairly different: first, as Jesus and three of His disciples come back down from the "mountain of transfiguration," we see the rest of the disciples' failure to deliver a little boy oppressed by a demon; next, we see Christ give another prophecy of his coming suffering, death, and resurrection, following by the disciples being "greatly distressed" about this news and intention of their Messiah; finally, we're told about a collection for the temple tax, which Jesus claims he is not obligated to pay, then pays for anyways in a miraculous way. At first, it's a little difficult to see how these three very different stories are connected and why they are grouped together here. But I think the unifying theme between them is that they all highlight the *disciples misunderstanding and failure*, contrasted with the *absolute sufficiency of Jesus*. This is a theme Matthew has been highlighting for us over the last few chapters: Jesus is revealing who He is, and the crowds and religious leaders are, for the most part, completely missing it; meanwhile, His closest disciples understand and believe, as it is revealed to them by GOD the Father, so that they even proclaim Him as the Messiah in 16:16! Yet their faith is a developing and struggling faith; they understand in part, but not completely; as we saw last week, right after they confessed faith in Christ as the Messiah, they rebuked Jesus for daring to proclaim that He would bring about His Kingdom and promised salvation through His own suffering and death.

And so it is with us at times, isn't it? As believers, we never claim to be perfect or to have everything together. All Christians experience growth and transformation, by God's grace - and

yet, it's a *zig-zag line*, filled with missteps and backpedaling along the way. Every one of our walks as Christians is filled with misunderstandings and failures; and yet, often times, we can't even see them! And so, this passage lets us see them *in the lives of the disciples* - since, again, it's far easier to see this in other people before we see it in ourselves, isn't it? So let us see what's being exposed in the disciples this morning - but not so we can look down on them; but rather, let us do so in order to then *see the same temptations and tendencies in our own hearts*.

So first, let us see that...

I. We are Tempted to Rely on Ourselves Instead of Relying on God by Faith (17:14-20)

In the beginning of chapter 17, Jesus brings three of the disciples - Peter, James, and John - up on the mountain for a special display of His glory (as we saw last week). While they were gone, the rest of the disciples were approached by a man whose son suffered violent seizures that threatened his life due to demonic oppression. Yet, the disciples were unable to drive the demon out, as the father tells Jesus in verses 14-16. After Jesus drives out the demon and heals the boy, the disciples ask him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" (v.19). Jesus gave the disciples authority to heal the sick and cast out demons in Matthew chapter 10; as we see in Mark (6:13) Luke (10:17), they were, indeed, successful at driving out demons before this! So why, then, did they fail this time?

Jesus gives the answer in verse 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.'" In other words, because they *lacked faith*. But here's the question we have to ask: is he talking about the *quantity* of their faith or the *quality*? Let's take the first part of the question first: is Jesus saying they didn't have *enough* faith? Is he saying that just didn't believe hard enough or sincerely enough - and if they did, then they would have been able to help this boy? No, I don't think that's what he's saying here. After all, the illustration he uses is that of a "mustard seed" - the smallest plant seed available. The whole point seems to be that it's not about the *size* of their faith; just a little bit we do, any amount of faith whatsoever is sufficient. What does he mean then?

I think the point is that the disciples do not have the *right kind of faith* - or rather, they are putting their faith and trust in the wrong object. This is why Jesus rebukes them in verse 17, saying, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" They simply didn't have faith at all - at least, *not the faith that counts*. This is

what I think was going on here: since the disciples had seen victory in the past when healing the sick and casting out demons, they had grown overconfident; they were trusting in *themselves*, as if the power and authority to do so came from within themselves; or as if they had somehow *earned* the power or were entitled to such authority. They were trusting in *themselves*, not trusting in the power and authority of God by faith. Mark's account of this same story makes this point clearly in Mk. 9:29: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." In other words, they failed *because they did not pray*; and they did not ask God to cast out the demon, to do what only He can do, *because they were relying on themselves*. They trusted in themselves, in their own ability and power, instead of depending upon God alone - and this is the very opposite of faith, the very essence of *unbelief*.

Self-reliance is completely incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news of Christ begins with the firm conviction that we are doomed because of our sins and that there is absolutely no way we can save ourselves; we are completely desperate and utterly dependent upon God to save us by His grace alone! And the good news is that Jesus Christ came to live, die, and be raised in the place of sinners, just like us; the good news is that if we *turn away* from trusting in ourselves - in our own works, our own righteousness, our own ideas of truth and reality - and turn to trust in Christ alone as our Lord and Savior, then God promises we will be *completely forgiven, saved, and even raised to eternal life!*

And yet, you and I are tempted by self-reliance every single day. We are constantly tempted to *trust in ourselves* instead of God; we're constantly tempted to live our lives as if *everything really does depend upon us and what we do, rather than who God is, what Christ has done, and who we are in Him!*

So here's the mirror we have to hold up before ourselves; we have to ask ourselves: Are you living your life in complete reliance upon the Lord and His promises? Or are you really trusting in yourself? Is your heart best described by *pride* or *humility*? Are you resting in the promises of God - or does your anxious heart keep you up at night? Are you worrying yourself crazy and working yourself to death because you're living as if your life and the good of others around you really depends on you, your works, your own efforts, abilities, and success? Or does your life *genuinely trust in the Lord*? When you share the gospel, disciple a fellow believer, or parent your children - do you share the truth of Christ as one who truly believes that the Spirit alone can convict them of sin, change their hearts, and save them? Or do you do so as one who

thinks that it's up to *us* to convince, change, and save other people? When sufferings and trials come into your life: do you turn in on yourself, in presumptuous pride or self-pitying despair? Or do you respond first *in prayer* - by running to Jesus and resting in God as your Father, truly trusting Him with all things, by faith?

Let us be aware of the stubborn self-reliance in our own hearts; let us confess it, repent of it, and run to Christ by resting in His grace! Trust in Jesus, for He is all you need!

And that's because, Jesus's Cross and Resurrection are sufficient! And yet...

II. We are Tempted to View the Cross as Weakness Instead of Victory (17:22-23)

Law week, in Matthew 16:21-23, we saw Jesus give the first *explicit* prophecy of his coming, suffering, death, and resurrection throughout his recorded ministry in the book of Matthew. Here, in 17:22-23, we see him give it again: "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.'" Once again, Jesus very clearly lays out what exactly what will happen in order for him to bring about His promised Kingdom and salvation for His people: He will willingly allow himself to be delivered over to the authorities of men in Jerusalem; he will suffer to the point of death, specifically, being crucified on a cross; and yet, on the third day, he will be raised from the grave! He is announcing the heart of the gospel: that he will give himself up as a sacrifice for our sins; he declares that he will not only die for our sins, but also that *He will be raised* from the grave in victory!

Yet how do the disciples respond? The end of verse 23 tells us: "And they were greatly distressed." Jesus proclaims to them that He will be raised from the dead! Yet they respond with *distress and despair*. They expected the Messiah - God's promised King and Savior - to come in power, to deliver them from their enemies in victory, and to establish His Kingdom, once and for all! But Jesus's words of willingly suffering and dying smacked not of power but *weakness*; not of victory, but *defeat*. How could Jesus truly be the Messiah if he was intentionally giving himself over to death? Odds are, they completely missed the truth of the resurrection he prophesied because they were so hung up on the distressing news of Jesus's coming suffering and death on a cross. Because they did not grasp the full power of the resurrection, all they saw in Jesus's coming death was *failure and defeat*. And so they despaired.

There is no salvation apart from Jesus's perfect, sinless life, His sacrificial death on the cross in the place of guilty sinners, and His glorious, victorious resurrection from the grave on the third day! We must *never* be ashamed of the cross. We must never view this gospel as weakness. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that there is any hope, for anyone anywhere, outside of faith in Christ alone. We must cling to the cross of Christ, not as the symbol of weakness and defeat, but of resurrection power and eternal victory!

But just as Jesus's own suffering and death was essential, so it is essential that we join him, bearing our own cross, just as we saw last week. All too often, we're tempted to despise and despair of the cross of Jesus - particularly when it comes to bear *on our own lives*. The cross of Christ has an infinite number of implications for our lives: it calls us to die to ourselves; to give up selfishness and pride; to embrace servant-hearted humility; to live for the Lord and others, not ourselves; to confess and repent of our sins and walk in obedience to King Jesus. The cross means willingly embracing whatever cost of suffering lies before us as we follow Christ. The unbelieving world around us sees the cross of Christ as a failure; it sees our repentance of sin and striving after holiness as weakness; it sees our suffering as failure to be despised.

Yet we must not despair! We must not be ashamed of the gospel; we must not despise the opportunity to cling to Christ, even in the midst of suffering! We must fix our eyes on the sure promise of *resurrection*. Jesus has truly been raised! All who trust in him will be raised with Him! We cling to Christ, no matter what, because *He has saved us, He will hold us fast, and He will surely raise us to eternal life with Him!* And that resurrection life - New Life in Christ - begins *now*. So let us not be ashamed of the cross, but cling to it, no matter what.

Finally, we see that...

III. We are Tempted to Trust Our Own Reason Instead of God's Truth (17:24-27)

Jesus and his disciples return to their homebase in Galilee - the town of Capernaum. And verse 24 tells us that while they were, some tax collectors came up to Peter, asking, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" Now this "two drachma tax" was not a Roman or civil government tax - it was the *temple tax*; it was seen as an obligation for every Jewish man to give this annual tax for the maintenance and upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. We've already seen how Jesus had garnered a reputation for going against the grain of his contemporary religious leaders; and so, these Temple tax collectors seem to be on the offensive here; perhaps they're assuming that Jesus

and his disciples simply won't pay it. So when Peter here's this, he immediately responds, "Yes." Now, he responds this way because he wants to defend Jesus's reputation; he wants to *elevate* the status of Jesus in the eyes of these Jewish representatives. It's as if he's saying, "Of course he'll pay the tax! He is a good, Jewish man; a reputable Jew, just like you! Of course he'll do his patriotic and religious duty!" In other words, he's defending Jesus's reputation - *but not on Jesus's terms*; he's trying to elevate Jesus *simply in the eyes of the world, on their own terms*.

Jesus makes this clear when Peter walks inside the house; before Peter even asks Jesus or lets him know what's going on, Jesus says, "What do you think, Sim?" From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" Again, the tax at hand is not from a king, but for the Temple; but to make a theological point, Jesus draws a comparison to *civic taxes*. A king does not tax his own son, but the ordinary subjects of his kingdom; therefore, the king's son is free from paying taxes. And so, Peter replied, "From others," and "Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are free. 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.'" In other words, Jesus is saying that He is not obligated to pay the Temple tax *because He the Son - the very Son of God Himself!* The temple belongs to God; Jesus *is* GOD - He is, Himself, the true temple: God dwelling among men *as a man, in the flesh!* Therefore, Peter had it wrong when he immediately affirmed that Jesus would pay the tax - Jesus is not obligated to do so! Jesus is not simply a *good man* - He is the perfect, blameless, righteous God! He is the God-Man - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! He doesn't need to be elevated in the eyes of mankind simply on *their own terms, to meet and match our expectations*; rather, mankind needs to *understand and believe* the truth of who Jesus is! We need to bow in submission to Jesus as God and King over all things! We need to truly trust in Him and what He declares as true.

We are tempted, at times, to be ashamed of God's truth as revealed in Christ, in His Word, in the Bible. And this temptation will probably only grow for us. Today is the first Sunday of June - and if you haven't heard, June is now officially "LGBTQ+ Pride Month." The culture all around us proclaims that *truth and reason* demand we get on the right side of history and celebrate what the Bible declares is sinful; mankind around us declares that *love obligates us* to do so. And so, we might be tempted to feel ashamed of what the Bible says; we may feel

tempted to stay silent, to water down the truth, or even to *change* what the Bible clearly teaches in order to be accepted by others.

But we don't need to be ashamed of who Jesus is, what he's done, or what He says. We don't need to be ashamed of God's truth. We don't need to *justify* who Jesus is; we don't need to make the gospel or the Bible conform to mankind's reason, demands, or expectations - in fact, to do so would be *cosmic treason*, rebellion against the Lord of glory Himself!

In summary, each section of this passage warns us against *self-reliance*, trusting in ourselves, our reason, or *anything other than God and the gospel of Jesus Christ*. There are so many ways we're tempted to be ashamed of the truth of God's Word and the Cross of Christ. There are so many ways we rely on ourselves and, by doing so, despise the truth and demands of the gospel. There are so many ways that you and I are given over to self-reliance and pride instead of dependant faith on GOD's grace.

Perhaps the greatest test of *self-reliance* vs. *faith* comes in our daily "quiet time" or personal devotional time with the Lord. When you come before the Lord, reading your Bible and praying, and are cut to the heart with conviction for every sin you did yesterday, last night, or even 30 minutes ago - how do you respond then, before the Lord, between just you and Him? How we respond in that moment is the greatest test of whether or not we're trusting in *ourselves*, relying on works-based righteousness - or whether or not we're relying on Christ alone, truly trusting and believing in the gospel of justification *by grace through faith in Christ alone!* When we're aware of our guilt and shame before God, we're often tempted to respond by thinking, "I have to clean myself up and get my life together *before* I pray, or read my Bible again, or go to church." In those moments, we're tempted to think that God will only forgive us if we first clean ourselves up, or at the very least, *promise to do better next time!* But brothers and sisters, beware that path - that is the path of *self-reliance and legalism!* It is the path of unbelief.

Instead, in those moments, we come before the Lord, saying, "Father God, I am utterly aware of just how sinful and messed up I am. I have nothing to offer you. I could never be good enough; I could never right my wrongs; I don't deserve your forgiveness. And yet, I believe in your promise, that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is sufficient to take away my sins! Please forgive me, not because of what I promise to do, *but because I am resting in the finished work of Christ alone!*"

That's the gospel - that's our only hope! So don't trust in yourself or anything else - have faith, rest, and trust in Jesus Christ alone!

If you have any questions about this - about how to become a Christian and be saved, or about baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you. YOu can come now and wait on the front row, or find me after the service. Let us pray.