

**Jesus Helps His Stumbling Disciples**

Matthew 17:14-27

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Some of the tallest trees in the world grow in California. They are commonly known as coastal or California redwoods. They are actually from the sequoia family of trees. They grow on average over 200 feet or 60 meters in height. The current tallest tree is the Hyperion measuring 379 feet or 115 meters in height. It has a diameter of around 29 feet or 8.9 meters. Now I'm told that in Sequoia national park, you can drive a car through the cut out trunk of one of the redwoods. Have any of you actually seen them?

These trees are massive. How long do you think they took to grow? One year? 5 years? 30 years? 100 years? No. Scientists or Botanists or whatever you call the tree people conclude that the redwoods have lived 1200 to 1800 years. They are some of the oldest living things on earth. Some of them go back to within 200 years of the time of Christ.

Any tree that grows to strength and maturity takes time. They move from seedlings to saplings to young trees to maturity. In a similar way it takes time for followers of Christ to grow. Sometimes, we want instant maturity in following Jesus. But it's a daily journey and includes some stumbles along the way. That's part of life and that's part of discipleship.

If you think back to your Christian walk this past month, there were hopefully times of growing closer to the Lord. But there were probably other times where we stumbled. We may have said something we shouldn't have or done something harmful. We may have adopted an unbiblical perspective of God and lived by that. Or we may have shown little or no faith in Him.

We're called to grow as disciples or followers of Jesus Christ. We enter into a journey of discipleship from the moment of our conversion until the moment of our death or Christ's return. It would be nice if it was one continuous journey of successive stages of growth. But we stumble. We slide sometimes. We fail to learn a lesson and have to repeat it.

Thankfully, we follow a Lord who does not live by the 3 strike rule. Jesus does not say "I'll give you up to 3 stumbles in your faith. But after that you're out." We have a Lord who walks with, encourages and enlightens us on our discipleship journey. Today we are going to see that **Jesus helps stumbling disciples on our journey of discipleship.** Jesus helps them get up and keep going after they fall.

We saw last week how Jesus revealed Himself through the spectacular display of the transfiguration. Peter, James and John have witnessed Jesus speaking in all His glory with Moses and Elijah. They have had the ultimate mountain top experience. Now, they come down the mountain to reengage in the real world. Jesus immediately has to deal with their stumbles. We're going to see how they stumbled and how Jesus helped them. I pray that if you've stumbled in your walk with Christ recently, you will be encouraged to get back up with Jesus' help to continue growing in your journey of discipleship.

### **Matthew 17:14-27 – ESV – Page 692**

<sup>14</sup> And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" <sup>20</sup> 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."

<sup>22</sup> As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, <sup>23</sup> and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

<sup>24</sup> 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?" <sup>25</sup> 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?" <sup>26</sup> And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. <sup>27</sup> 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."

Jesus, Peter, James and John are coming off the ultimate mountain top experience. But when you come down off a mountaintop, you have to enter into life on the valley below. We may experience that a little when we come back from vacation. We have to get back into the routine of work or school and the daily grind of life.

Matthew tells us they come to a crowd containing the other 9 disciples and some people. Out of the crowd comes a father of a troubled son. He kneels before Jesus and appeals for help. "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." So this man's son is afflicted with something that causes him great harm. The English versions of the Bible translate it "epilepsy." The word

literally means “to be affected by the moon.” We get our English word lunatic from this understanding because in ancient times, the general population believed that someone who acted crazy was affected by the moon or the lunar body orbiting the planet. But here, the symptoms do seem to somewhat resemble epilepsy. The man’s son seems to have seizures that result in him falling in fire or water like a river where he could drown.

But Matthew’s primary concern is not with the father and boy. The real problem is found in verse 16. The father says, “I brought him to your disciples and they could not heal him.” And Matthew is one of those disciples. Back in Matthew 10, Jesus commissions the 12 to go out healing and casting out demons. They had success in this ministry. But they cannot deal with this man’s son.

Jesus responds in maybe a surprising way to some of us. He shows frustration! He doesn’t calmly call the boy before him or gently smile at the disciples before granting the request. He expresses frustration testing of his patience. “O faithless and twisted generation; how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” Now we’re not sure who Jesus aims this at. Is he looking at the disciples and calling them faithless and twisted? Well, we will see in a moment that Jesus acknowledges the disciples had some faith. So He must be talking about the crowd and generation in particular. Jesus has ministered many times and shown His power. Yet there is still faithlessness and a twisted understanding of His identity and mission. His patience runs thin. If you’re patience has ever neared running out with someone, you might be a little encouraged that even Jesus experienced frustration as a person. But He didn’t let that frustration take over the situation.

He instructs the father to bring the boy to him. Matthew tells us “Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him and the boy was healed instantly.” Where did this demon come from? The father only spoke of the illness. Yet this reveals how afflictions can come in a variety of ways. This boy suffered physical affliction by the illness and spiritual affliction by the demon. Jesus deals with both and heals the boy instantly.

At a later more private moment, the disciples ask why they couldn’t cast out this demon. Jesus answers, “It is because of your little faith.” Jesus’ response explains how the disciples stumbled in this episode. **Stumble 1 – 17:14-21 – The disciples have an ineffective faith.** They had faith but it wasn’t properly focused. “But wait Tom, doesn’t Jesus criticize them for not having enough faith? He uses the word ‘little.’” That seems to be the case at first glance. But in a

moment He will emphasize that just a little amount of faith will be able to move mountains which was a proverbial way of saying a massive, seemingly impossible problem.

So “little” faith must mean something different than a certain amount. I agree with commentators who argue Jesus talks about ineffective faith.

So what is ineffective and effective faith? What is faith? It is taking God at His Word. It is confidence that we can do what God calls us to do. But didn’t God call the disciples to cast out demons and heal?

Yes, but in Matthew 10, it appears this situation was more difficult. This was not only an illness, though illness is serious. This is not only a demon, though a demon oppression is serious. This is illness mixed in with a demon. What might have the disciples assumed? “Oh, we’ve done this before. We can just say the magic formula and the child will be healed.” But it didn’t work.

What went wrong? Don Carson puts it like this. “The disciples exercised an ineffective faith that treated the authority entrusted to them like magic. All you have to do is say the right formula, push the right buttons and out pops the miracle. But real faith is less magic than trust, less ritual than relationship. It does not so much seek to exercise power as to know, obey, love and serve God.”

So we could put it like this. **Ineffective faith** tries to domesticate God or reduce Him to an “on call” power supplier. It believes performing the ritual or saying the right phrases will guarantee God’s power. **Effective faith** is more concerned with relating to God; discerning and submitting to His will; turning to Him in dependence and submission for our needs. It is exercised in an environment of prayer and communion with God.

So Jesus helps the disciples understand why they stumbled.

**Jesus’ Help - He reveals their ineffective faith and teaches them about effective faith.**

We too can stumble with ineffective faith where we treat God and Jesus like our servants. We expect them to be on call to do whatever we want them to do. And in one sense, God is just a prayer away. But that doesn’t mean He’s a prayer away from doing whatever we want. God’s purposes go much deeper than our desires.

We could take this episode and conclude that God always wants our loved one to be healed if only we exercise enough faith. But God often has other purposes to accomplish. Sometimes He wants to refine us through the process of testing. Sometimes He wants to strengthen our faith or save others who will only come to Him by seeing His power in

the people going through the hardship. Sometimes He wants to heal and bring wholeness. Sometimes He waits to be asked so we learn to stop being so self-sufficient. Sometimes He waits to teach us patience and show us the world doesn't revolve around our time table. Sometimes we have no clue what He's doing and just have to trust in His goodness and love. Sometimes we experience hardship because we live in a fallen world – it's not because God is punishing us or striking back at us or getting us. It's part of life in this world where disease, death, evil and sin remain for now. But we have the hope that these will not last and will one day be ultimately defeated by Christ when He returns.

Sometimes God does not heal because He has other purposes and plans. Some of you have walked a long journey of dealing with chronic illness yourself or in your family. Maybe someone has told you "if you just had more faith you'd be healed or your loved one would be healed." But sometimes God has different purposes. You may have seen or met our Youth Pastor Justin and Andrea's son Toby. You can learn about them on the Facebook page Pray for Toby. *Toby was born on October 12th, 2011. We found out half way through our pregnancy that Toby had Myelomeningocele, more commonly known as Spina Bifida. By God's grace, we made peace with this diagnosis and could hardly wait to meet Toby and begin his journey with him. What we didn't know, was that he also had a very rare and often confusing brain condition that drastically affects how his brain stem functions. Because of this, while he was still in the delivery room, he was immediately intubated, meaning that he had a tube inserted into his airway, so a machine could "ventilate", as in breathe, for him.*

But what was it like for Justin and Andrea to deal with the reality of their son's condition? Here's some of Justin's reflections shared with his permission. *My experience of being a father to a boy born with multiple medical complications has given me a change in perspective on healing. Nearly every single night for the past 4 years I have prayed for healing for my son. Before he was born I would spend hours, literally on my face, praying that he would be healed. However in our 8 months in the NICU with Toby, as I watched another family pray over their child every single day, I asked myself – what would it be like if Toby was miraculously healed today, and not their son? Or what would it be like if their boy was healed but not mine? It would be devastating to someone.*

*Christians do not get a free pass from earthly struggles. God doesn't eliminate health issues, poverty, relationship strain, depression, worry, etc because His plan is to use them to show his power. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 says: "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a*

*messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

*That's incredible. In Toby's medical complications, I have learned to depend on God's grace and power in ways I cannot communicate in text. It has revealed my weakness and made me turn to Him and trust Him more and more. Someday we will be free from poverty, pain, and sickness, but for now God uses those things to grow us. We see that all through scripture. We see it in Job, Peter, Paul, and of course Jesus.*

So we learn from this that instead of focusing so completely on getting our way when it comes to some difficult situation, effective faith focuses on getting closer to God in the situation. That's what the disciples had to continue to learn in the last weeks they had with Jesus.

The story continues with them gathering in Galilee to prepare for Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. In verses 22 and 23, we discover the disciple's second stumble. Matthew writes "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. This is the second announcement of the coming suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. But this time, Jesus adds that he will be delivered.

But how do the disciples stumble here? Matthew tells us they were greatly distressed at this news. It is understandable in their concern for their Lord. But where is their reaction to his being raised the third day? **Stumble 2 – 17:22-23 – The disciples fail to see beyond Jesus' suffering and death.** It seems like they can't get beyond the first two. It begs the question what difference did the hope of the resurrection make in their lives? They still had an either or view of Messiah. He was either going to be triumphant and victorious. Or he was doomed to be defeated and die. They could not think of a Messiah who would suffer, die and be victorious. They were stuck in him being killed. But once the disciples experienced the resurrected Jesus, their lives were completely transformed. Resurrection became a reality.

We live on the other side of that resurrection. But we can still approach life with an “either-or” emphasis. Either life is triumphant and victorious or it is suffering and misery. But with Christ in our lives, God can bring something good out of the suffering and misery. We still await the coming resurrection – of our loved ones and ourselves after we die. The hope of the resurrection can sustain us even through the darkest valleys.

I just reread Eric Metaxas’ book on the life and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was executed on April 9, 1945 for resisting Hitler just weeks before the war ended. He had been in prison for 2 years and was being held in a building by Buchenwald Concentration Camp. A diary of one of Bonhoeffer’s co-conspirators had been discovered in early April. Its contents were delivered to Hitler including the names of fellow conspirators. Hitler was by now in his bunker in Berlin in the last days of the destruction of Germany when he heard about or read this diary. Now he had, at least in his mind, *the reason* why he had lost the war. It was the conspirators. So he flew into a rage and announced any conspirators remaining alive should be immediately executed.

On Easter Sunday, Bonhoeffer led a service for those detained in the building he was in. At the end of that service, two men from the Gestapo burst into the room announcing – “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us.” By that time, everyone knew those words were a death sentence.

Bonhoeffer turned to a friend, “This is the end for me. But it’s also the beginning.” The doctor who observed his hanging remarked that never in 50 years of practice had he seen a prisoner go to the gallows so at peace and completely submissive to the will of God. Why did Bonhoeffer have such peace? Because of his hope in Christ and the resurrection. So if this hope can sustain someone in those circumstances through that valley, it can also sustain us through the valleys we go through.

If we remember God can bring something good out of all the things we go through. It’s a hard lesson on the journey of discipleship. The disciples didn’t get it at this point – but they would.

The last stumble in this passage is committed by Peter. Some temple tax collectors come to Capernaum where Jesus and His disciples stay before their departure for Jerusalem. The temple tax was collected every year from every adult Jewish male. This paid for the upkeep of the temple. The amount was equivalent to about 2 day’s wages. So this is a religious tax.

These collectors ask Peter “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” Peter immediately responds with a “Yes” in defense of Jesus. But here’s the stumble. **Stumble 3 – 17:24-27 – In defending Jesus’ status, Peter actually lowers Jesus’ status.** Peter thinks Jesus is obligated to pay the tax. But then Peter meets Jesus who speaks first. He asks Peter a question. “What do you think Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or others?” In other words, “How does our world work Peter? Do kings tax their own children to fund their expense or others?” Peter answers “others.” Royal children were exempt from paying the taxes demanded by their father the king. Jesus affirms this with his response “then the sons are free.”

What does that have to do with whether or not Jesus should pay the temple tax? Well who owned the temple ultimately? Whose temple was it? God’s. So since Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, He was free from paying the temple tax. Since Peter was a believer in God’s Son, he had been adopted into God’s family. So he too was exempt from the temple tax.

But few would understand this reasoning at that time. So Jesus instructs Peter to go fishing in the way that most of us go fishing today. Go throw a line into the sea with a hook and catch a fish. All other accounts of fishing involved dropping of nets. But here Jesus performs a miracle. Peter would throw his line into the sea and the first fish caught would have the temple tax payment for both of them in its mouth.

So **Jesus helps by teaching Peter his true status before God and providing for his need.** He doesn’t humiliate Peter. He doesn’t rebuke him. Jesus reinforces His identity as God’s Son and then identifies Peter as one of the children of God.

As Christians, we can learn from this at we need to accept that we have been adopted into God’s family. Have you accepted that you are a child of God and that can’t change? You can’t biologically stop being the child of your biological parents. We can’t spiritually stop being the children of God. So in light of this, live as God’s children.

This passage continues to paint the picture that was started last week where we discovered we don’t have to find our way alone. Christ lights our way. He helps us when we stumble. He puts up with us and our lack of faith. He bears with us and at times allows us to go through stuff we have brought on ourselves. He continues to clarify and teach us about Himself and His ways. He shows compassionate longsuffering with us in our journey of discipleship.



So how might you respond today? If you have stumbled in your faith recently, join the club. But don't stay in your stumbled stat. Get up by Jesus' help and keep growing. If you haven't stumbled, great. But the next time you do, turn to Jesus to help you up to keep going. Maybe God has revealed the state of your faith today. Maybe He has uncovered the fact that you don't really trust in Him with a faith that wants to grow close to Him. Your faith is more like a superstitious faith – you say the right words or you do the right ritual and you hope God responds. That's not faith as the Bible defines it. Faith trusts Christ for permanent forgiveness from sin; security of salvation; protection on Judgment Day; new spiritual life given by the Holy Spirit. Some people call it "saving faith." It is not the faith that actually does the saving. God saves through the faith of the person. Faith is the pipeline or conduit or channel through which God pours all His grace. True faith that turns away or repents from our old way of life. But we turn to something much better in Christ. "For it is by grace we are saved through faith." So today, if you sense that God has revealed to you that you do not have a true faith in Him, I want to invite you to turn to Him in faith and receive Christ today. You do that by taking that little spark or that little desire for God or faith as small as a mustard seed. If you want to do that now, will you repeat this little prayer after me in your heart or out loud quietly.

- Lord God, I confess I have not had a real faith in you.
- I have only come to you making demands of what I want.
- But now I desire to know you and draw near you.
- I realize my need for you to save me.
- I cannot save myself.
- So I repent of my sins and my old way of life.
- I turn to you Jesus in faith as my Savior and Lord.
- Please come into my life now.
- Amen