Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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May 2, 2004 by Steve Brandon

**Elijah and Faith**

**Matthew 17:10-21**

## Question #1: What about Elijah? (verses 10-13).
## Question #2: What about our spiritual power? (verses 14-21)

Let's begin this morning by reading the first 21 verses of Matthew 17.

> Matthew 17:1-21
> Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, "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. I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him." 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." And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" 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. [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.]"

In recent weeks, we have been looking at a section of Matthew's gospel where Jesus reveals Himself to the disciples. This section began in chapter 16, when Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16: 13). Upon receiving a heavenly revelation, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Jesus affirmed this assertion (Matt. 16:17) and began to instruct the disciples as to what this means. It means that He would suffer and die and rise again (Matt. 16:21). It means that following Jesus will cost you everything (Matt. 16:24). Last week, we saw Jesus reveal His deity in the transfiguration. His flesh began to shine forth like the sun. Moses and Elijah, representatives of the Old Testament Scriptures, came to affirm Jesus. In the midst of this entire revelatory process, the disciples of Jesus were certainly facing some confusion. Peter didn't understand that the Messiah must die and rise again (Matt. 16:23). We will soon see that none of the disciples really understood this either, as they grieved in Jesus' plan, rather than demonstrating joy (Matt. 17:23).

In our text this morning, we will see the disciples come to Jesus with two questions, both of which are coming from their confusion of the events of the day. The first question comes in verse 10 and concerns the theological question of Elijah. The second question comes in verse 19 and concerns the practical question of their own lack of spiritual power and abilities. Our outline will be based around these two questions: Question #1: What about Elijah? (verses 10-13), and Question #2: What about our spiritual power? (verses 14-21). Because of the nature of these questions, the first half of my sermon will be more theological. The second half of my sermon will be more practical. Let's look at the first question, ...

## Question #1: What about Elijah? (verses 10-13).

Verse 10, "And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?'"

Have you ever been in the situation when you were discussing spiritual things with somebody and you have been asked a question that you simply couldn't answer? Perhaps you have been sharing the gospel with someone who is more intelligent or more knowledgeable about Christianity than you are, and they bring up some point that you have never thought of before. Perhaps you have been talking with others about some particular point of doctrine, in which they hold to a different point of view. They bring a scriptural question before you that you can't answer. They take you to some verse, which appears to support what they are saying, rather than what you are saying. It brings you to a point of confusion. You don't know what is right. You are at a standstill, and the conversation stops. These situations are good things in life to face, because they really help you learn. They give you a reason to learn. You can use what you learn in speaking with others. Next time, you don't want to look as though you were foolish and ignorant. So it gives you reason to dig deeper into your faith.

I know that I have been in situations like this, and sometimes I have picked up books to research the issue and find the answer. Sometimes, I have sought the counsel of someone who knows a bit more than I do, and have asked that person for an answer. Sometimes I forget about the question, but something triggers its memory. Sometimes, I know that that person who can answer my question is standing right in front of me. I might say to the person, "Oh, yeah, now that we are talking about that, I have a question for you."

I can easily see the situation with Jesus' disciples, which took place long before the transfiguration ever took place. The disciples of Jesus were out preaching, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" as Jesus had instructed them to do that (Matt. 10:7). And they had encountered some scribes, who knew the law very well and had a few questions for those who proclaimed that the kingdom was near. They may have said, "Hey, Mr. Disciple-of-Jesus, you say that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. But, the Scriptures teach that Elijah will come first. You simply need to read Malachi, chapter 4 or Isaiah 40. Both of these passages speak about one coming to prepare the way for the LORD. So, where is Elijah? Has he come first? If he hasn't come, then why are you saying that the kingdom of heaven is at hand?"

I believe that this is what took place with the disciples and prompted their question in verse 10. This question probably came as a result of seeing Elijah on the mountain. His presence triggered in their mind the lingering question that they had about Elijah. The scribes had asked them this question, but they just didn't know the answer. In verse 11, Jesus answers the question. First, He affirms the teaching of the scribes. What they have said is absolutely right. Look at verse 11, "Elijah is

coming and will restore all things." The Jewish people have always been looking for Elijah to come. To this day, the Jewish people are continuing to look for Elijah to come. When the Passover is celebrated by Jewish people today all around the world, they always set an extra place-setting for Elijah, just in case Elijah shows up at their feast. There reaches a point during the Seder meal, when the front door is opened and the children look out to see if Elijah is coming. We may laugh at the extent to which they look for and anticipate the coming of Elijah. But Jesus says that they are exactly right. Jesus said that there is a day when Elijah will come. And when he comes, he will set many things in order. So, the scribes are exactly right in their assertion.

Verse 12 begins with "But..." You need to understand something about Elijah. Sure, Elijah will come in the future. "But I say to you, that Elijah already came." "Now wait a minute," they say to Jesus. "I thought that you said that Elijah will come. How is it that He already came? It doesn't make sense." This is one of the reasons why the Bible is such a great book! There are things in the Bible that are very simple and straightforward and easy to understand. Our family is reading through the Bible together out loud. There is much that my children understand. Even Hanna, our four year old has demonstrated an understanding of many of the things that we have read. And yet, there are passages like the one before us this morning, which are a bit more difficult to understand. Even the greatest minds in all the world haven't fully grasped everything in the Bible.

How is it that Elijah is coming, but Elijah already came? Before I answer that question, I want to give you an insight into what often happens in our home. As many of you know, we named our son after his grandfather. My father's name is "Stanley Brandon." My son's name is "Stanley Brandon." Do you know what comes in the mail for my son? Advertisements for retirement investment opportunities. Information on Medicare at its benefits. Advertisements for full body scans, which check for cancer or heart disease. I remember once, he received an advertisement for "scooters." When I told him that he received a letter that was advertising for "scooters," he was pretty excited. In his mind, he was thinking that the scooters were the things that you ride on like a skateboard. He loves looking at these types of catalogues, because he does pretty well scooting around on these things. So, I gave him the letter. But, he soon found out that the "scooters" were self-propelled wheelchair scooters for those who could no longer walk very well. These things are sent to him, because these advertising agencies think that he is grandpa. The confusion comes because there are two "Stanley Brandons" in this world.

There are two Elijahs just like there are two "Stanley Brandons." One Elijah is coming. One Elijah has come. This is how Jesus can say, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came." When you understand that there are two Elijah's, it all comes to make sense.

Continuing on in verse 12, you see Jesus describing the Elijah that came. He said, "and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." So, who is Jesus talking about here? He's talking about John the Baptist. He's talking about the one who was despised by the religious leaders and eventually beheaded by Herod the tetrarch because of his bold preaching. This is what the disciples understood Jesus to say. Verse 13 says that "the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist." So, John the Baptist was Elijah.

But, Elijah is also coming. So, when John was asked by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, "Are you Elijah?" He could say, "I am not" (John 1:21). He could be exactly right. He wasn't the Elijah that was to come. But, the evidence of Scripture is overwhelming in saying the John the Baptist was Elijah that came. At his birth, an angel of the Lord told Zacharias, the father of John, that John

> "...will go as a forerunner before [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

John was the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6. Every single one of the four gospels point to John as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord" (Matt. 3:3). John was the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3. (See also Matthew 11:10, where Jesus says the same thing). And Jesus, Himself, said that John is Elijah. In Matthew 11, Jesus said, "if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come" (Matt. 11:14).

When John describes his ministry, he always described himself as one leading the way and pointing to Jesus who is the more important One. John said, ...

> "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1: 29).
> "I have beheld the Sprit descending and remaining upon Him" (John 1: 32).
> "I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John 1:

34).
"I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent before Him" (John 3:28).
"He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

John the Baptist was indeed Elijah, whose task was to prepare the way for the Lord. Our ministry ought to be like John the Baptist. He pointed everybody to Jesus. He prepared the way for the Lord. As we speak with others, we ought to point everybody to Jesus. We ought to prepare the way for the Lord to be seen in all of His glory and loveliness.

The next time the disciples faced the scribes and were asked the question about Elijah, they were ready with the answer. They replied, "Elijah did come first. It was John the Baptist. But, he didn't come quite like you expected him to come. He was killed. It is the same with the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, whether you care to accept Him or not. And we are following Him."

Now that we've addressed the first question on the mind of the disciples is, let's focus our attention on their second question, ...

## Question #2: What about our spiritual power? (verses 14-21)

The story begins in verse 14, ...

> "And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "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." (Matt. 17:14-15)

Here was a desperate man, who had a son who was sick and needed healing. This boy is described as a lunatic. This is a perfect translation of the Greek word, which describes the boy as being "moon-struck." The word "lunatic," has in it the word, "lunar," which refers to the moon. In some ways, this boy was affected by the moon (or something mysterious like this). Some versions say that he suffered from epilepsy, but that isn't quite right because the real cause of his sickness was demon possession, as we see from verse 18. Though, he does appear to have seizures, which may have resembled epileptic Grand Mall seizures. Mark said that there are times that he could be found on the ground, foaming at the mouth, grinding his teeth, and stiffening out (Mark 9:18). This sounds like epilepsy, but Mark says that this took place because an evil spirit would come upon him and overtake him.

Here was a boy who loved to play by the fire, but an evil spirit would come upon him and he would roll on the ground right into the fire. Here was a boy who loved to play down by the pond, but an evil spirit would come upon him and he would fall into the water. Certainly, this boy had to be rescued on many occasions from his habits. Think about the life of this father. It would have been very difficult as he (or someone else) always had to have a watchful eye upon his child, lest he encounter some danger and die.

At the Brandon house, we know a bit of what that is like. We have an 8 month-old living in our house: our baby daughter, Stephanie. She is just getting to that point where we she can crawl around and explore the world. This means that we have to keep our eye upon her. We need to child-proof our house once again. We have put plastic plugs in the electrical outlets. We have put baby locks on the cabinet doors. We have begun to shut the door to the basement, lest she tumble down the stairs. Soon, we will put up some gates to protect her from climbing the stairs. We have begun to watch her every move. In fact, this week we began to teach her what the word, "No" means. She was playing with some of our plants, ripping some of the leaves, which would surely find their way into her mouth. And, she was digging into the dirt, which also was taste-tested like everything else that she finds these days. We said, "No, Stephanie." She looked back at us and smiled because she heard us say something, and then kept going at her gardening activities. She doesn't yet know what "No" means. So, I lightly slapped her hand to help her learn what "No" means. It means, "if you continue this activity, you will feel a stinging sensation upon your hand, which is very unpleasant. It is much better to stop what you are doing." We need to protect her from the constant danger that she will likely encounter. We know that this is a phase that she is going through (as all of our children did), but she will soon grow out of it as she learns what she can play with and what she can't play with.

But it is not so with this boy. He hadn't yet grown out of this stage. We don't know exactly how old this little boy it, but the sense of the story is that he somewhere around the age of 8-13. These seizures continued to take place and cause this father to keep constant watch on his son. This man was desperate and came to request help from Jesus. In many ways, she was like the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus in Matthew 15 with similarly desperate health problems. Both of them came to Jesus on behalf of their children. This man had a son who needed help (verse 15). The Canaanite woman had a daughter in need of help (Matt. 15: 22). Both of these children were living a miserable life and were making the lives of their parents miserable as well. I've described the life of this boy and this father. The Canaanite woman's daughter was described as being "cruelly demon-

possessed" (Matt. 15:22). We can only imagine what this meant, but it was probably similar to the boy's condition. Furthermore, both of these children were demon possessed. In verse 18, Jesus casts the demon out of this man's son. Likewise, the Canaanite woman's daughter was demon possessed.

This man and the Canaanite woman approached Jesus similarly. Both of them came to Jesus in the posture of a beggar. This man is said to "fall on his knees" before Jesus (verse 14). The Canaanite woman was said to "bow down before Him" (Matt. 15:25). Both of them acknowledge their low position before Jesus. This man called Jesus, "Lord" (verse 15). So did the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15: 22). They lifted Jesus high, and placed themselves low. Both of them came to Jesus pleading only for mercy. This man said, "Lord, have mercy on my son" (verse 15). The Canaanite woman said, "Have mercy on me" (Matt. 15:22).

They both found healing from the hands of Jesus. Both of these children were healed instantly when the demon left them. In verse 18, we read that "the boy was cured at once." This exact same phrase describes what happened to the Canaanite woman's daughter. She was healed "at once" (Matt. 15:28). Literally, "from that hour." There were no more seizures. No more burns. No more near-drowning. No more choking. No more accidents.

Both this father and the Canaanite woman are models of those who Christ is willing to help. Christ will help those people who have real problems in their lives. These people came to Jesus with very sick children, and He healed them. You might have a sick child. Or, your problems might be different. You might be facing the result of your sin. You might be dealing with a difficult relationship in your life. You might be having some type of crisis in your life. Christ will help you. But you need to come like these people did. They came acknowledging His sovereignty. They came acknowledging His healing ability. They came with great humility, realizing that they were at the end of themselves. There was nothing more that they could do. They came pleading only for mercy from Jesus, and Jesus helped them. And when you come to Christ like this, He will help you. Oh, Jesus may not heal your child, remove the effects of your sin, restore your relationship, or solve your crisis. But, He will do something better; he will help you with your greatest problem: your sin before God. "If you confess your sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Furthermore, he will help you through the difficulties of this life to prepare you for the life to come. So, come to Jesus in this way. You will find Him true.

Before this man actually came to Jesus for help, he came to the disciples. This is what he tells Jesus in verse 16, "And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him." When you piece together the other gospel narratives, you get the picture that this was happening while Jesus was upon the mountain with Peter, James and John. The other nine disciples were together at the base of the mountain. (Thus, it makes sense that he came to the disciples first, because Jesus wasn't around at the moment. He came to the office, but the boss wasn't there, so he asked the secretaries for help). Three of the disciples are having a mountain-top experience, while the other nine disciples are having a frustrating experience. They tried to cast out this demon, but it didn't work. Remember, this is taking place months after these same disciples had already by sent out by Jesus to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons" (Matt. 10:8). On that journey, the disciples had certainly healed many people and had cast out many demons. Luke tells us that these disciples "returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name'" (Luke 10:17). So these disciples were experienced. The disciples knew that they could cast out demons, because they had done it before. But, for some reason now, as they tried to cure this boy, they couldn't.

You can only imagine what exactly took place with these disciples. This boy was brought to the disciples to be healed. They may have prayed over this boy, and nothing happened. They may have repeated their prayer, but nothing happened. They may have placed their hands upon the boy and prayed again, and nothing happened. These disciples may have rebuked the demons dwelling in the boy by saying something like, "In the name of Jesus, I command you to come out!" But nothing happened. Perhaps they pleaded with God using loud cries! Perhaps they appealed to the authority that Jesus had given them. For some reason, they couldn' t do it like they had done it before.

Rather than simply admitting defeat and sending this man and his boy home, Mark tells us that these disciples actually ended up in an argument with some of the scribes who happened to be standing by (Mark 9:14). Perhaps the scribes were mocking them: "You expect the demons to obey you?" The disciples had answered, "Well, they have before." The scribes said, "No, they didn't." The disciples, "Yes, they did." "No, they didn't." "Yes, they did." "No, they didn't." "Yes, they did." "No!" "Yes!" "NO!" "YES!" "**NO!**" "**YES!**" (Parents, have you ever heard this kind of productive conversation in your house?) At any rate, it must have been a frustrating experience for the disciples. They were spiritual failures. They couldn't cast this demon out of the son. Then, they lost their cool by

arguing with these scribes. They had nothing with which to back up their claims. And then, to make matters worse, Jesus comes on the scene and witnesses everything.

After hearing the story from the father of this boy, Jesus says, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me" (verse 17). It almost appears as if Jesus orders the boy to be brought before Him in disgust. "And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once" (verse 18). What the disciples had failed to do, Jesus appeared to do with little effort. With a word, this unclean spirit obeyed Jesus and left the boy (cf. Mark 1:27). This is the last we hear of the man or his boy. I believe the account of the man and his boy is included by Matthew simply because of what happens immediately after the healing. The point of this passage is not the man and his boy; the point is found in the conversation that follows the healing. In verse 19, when the disciples ask Jesus, "Why could we not cast it out?" (verse 19). Jesus said, "*Because of the littleness of your faith*" (verse 20). The lesson that Jesus teaches here is one of faith.

We saw a preview of this in verse 17, when Jesus said, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" Jesus didn't have to say those two sentences. When he heard that the disciples weren't able to cure this man's son, He could have simply said, "You can' t cast Him out? I know that I can. Bring him here to Me. I'll help him" But, Jesus didn't say this. He first brought attention to the issue at hand. The issue is their unbelief. It isn't simply the disciples' problem. It goes beyond that. It was the systemic problem of the generation of Jesus' day. They continually doubted. A doubting generation is a perverted generation. This is us. We are a doubting generation. Paul writes, "Whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Our morality today is relative. We think that we can come to truth by popular vote. We deny God and so He has let us alone to do our wickedness. (Abortion, homosexuality, and fornication abound in our generation; these are signs of unbelief.) The mere mention of God is quickly becoming taboo in our day. We need faith in the Triune God.

Such a doubting generation is a burden to God. Those who have no faith pain His heart. As Jesus observed the lack of faith all around Him, it grieved His soul. "How long shall I put up with you?" Jesus was wearied with the constant unbelief of those around Him. Perhaps you remember those words of Jesus which He spoke shortly before His death. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children

together the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). God is burdened and saddened by those who refuse to come to Him. Though Jesus condemns His generation by His words, He also gives us a window into His soul. God loves to see those who have great faith. He longed that they would believe, for then, His soul would delight in them. But, here instead, Jesus said, "How long shall I be with you?" I believe that Jesus wanted to die and accomplish redemption and return to glory with His Father in heaven. He wanted to be done with these faithless and wicked people.

But, not only does Jesus show us His heart, He also pinpoints the bigger issue in this narrative. The issue behind these struggling disciples is their lack of faith. They are an unbelieving generation. Jesus said that you couldn't cast out this demon, "Because of the littleness of your faith." They had "little faith." This isn't the first time Jesus had pronounced these words on them. In fact, this is the fifth time that Jesus rebuked His disciples for having little faith. The first time came in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus addressed the issue of those who worried about sustaining their life. Jesus said,

> "Do not be anxious for your life as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. If God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, 'O men of little faith'?" (Matt. 6:25, 30).

The second time was in the boat, when the storm came up. Jesus addressed those who were terrified of dying in the storm. The disciples awoke Jesus saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!" (Matt. 8:25). And Jesus said, "Why are you timid, you men of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26). The third time was when Peter walked on the water and began to drown. Jesus took hold of him and said, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31). The fourth time was when the disciples worried about having little bread to eat (though Jesus had just finished feeding the 4,000 people). He said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?" (Matt. 16:8).

Every time that Jesus spoke about their little faith, He did so by asking a rhetorical question. God arrays the grass of the field, won't he provide for you? You are fearful of perishing, but I am in the boat with you. Why are you timid? You are walking on the water, Peter. Why did you doubt? I just fed more than 4,000

people. Why are you worried about what you will eat? Jesus asks rhetorical questions like these, because often, our unbelief doesn't make rational sense. Belief is rational. Unbelief in not rational.

In verse 20, Jesus continues to speak about faith and how it works. He said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you" (Matt. 17:20). A mustard seed was well known in those times as the smallest of seeds. Moving a mountain, even today with all of our earth-moving equipment, is one of the biggest of tasks. Jesus says, "Even a little faith can accomplish great things." What is better than that is this: "Even a little faith can accomplish impossible things."

This week I was meditating upon this verse and something came into my mind with respect to this church that would be absolutely impossible to happen. I'm telling you, I see no possible way that it will come to pass. But, I'm praying for it. Friday night I didn't sleep very well. I was up thinking and praying about this issue. I don't have the faith to move mountains. I don't have the faith to see the impossible take place. But, I'm committed to pray for those things anyway, because Jesus says that there is a connection between prayer and faith. **Prayer builds faith**. This is demonstrated in verse 21, where Jesus says, "this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (verse 21).

There is debate about verse 21. The debate concerns whether Matthew actually wrote these words or not. Many of our best manuscripts do not contain these words. The debate is pretty meaningless, because in Mark's account, there can be no doubt as to its inclusion. In the gospel of Mark, when the disciples questioned Jesus, "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus said, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:28-29). Perhaps the only thing to debate is the inclusion of the word, "fasting."

At any rate, the connection between prayer and faith is obvious. The disciples couldn't cast the demon out because of their little faith. The way to cast the demon out is to pray. I believe that prayer develops faith. As Jesus says this, He isn't saying that it's the prayer of desperation or the fasting of desperation that is going to accomplish great things right then. Right then and there, Jesus didn't devote his energies to praying and fasting. Rather, Jesus is referring to the prayer of the closet and the fasting in secret, that will develop faith in you and give you the ability to cast the demon out. I have heard people say, "That person prays because he has faith. I'm just not quite so spiritual. Therefore, I just can't be as devoted to prayer at that person. God has made me different than they are. God has given them faith

to pray." But, I would contend that this reasoning is backwards; He is a person of faith, because he prays. It's the prayer that develops the faith that leads to spiritual stability and power. Do you want to be a person of great faith? Pray.

This is the clear lesson for us this morning: there is a connection between faith and your regular spiritual disciplines. Jesus said, "You can't cast demons out of this boy, unless you spend your time praying and fasting." Praying is to actions of faith what exercise is to athletic competition. We would deem an athlete foolish if he were simply to show up for the game and expect to do well. We know that that won't work. Unless the athlete devotes long hours to wind-sprints, and weight-training, and practicing of skills, he will not be successful. Praying is to actions of faith what study is to the student. We think it foolish for a student to skip all classes and refuse to read the books, but show up for test day in anticipation of doing well. We know that that student will flunk. Unless a student devotes himself note-taking, and book-reading, and memorization of certain, key facts, he will not pass his course. Praying is to actions of faith what practice is to the musician. We would consider a musician to be foolish if he didn't pick up his instrument for months, but show up for his concert and expect to do well. We know that such a musician will sound terrible. Unless the musician is committed to practicing daily the scales and the fingering, he won't sound very well. So also in life. It is foolish for a Christian to skip the spiritual disciplines of praying and fasting and Bible-reading and church attendance and memorization, and giving, and Christian fellowship, but attempt to follow Christ in life. We know that the Christian will fail, as these disciples did.

Oh, for them, it was casting out demons. This probably won't be your battle this week. Your battle might be more like, conquering that temptation that has often overcome you. It may be demonstrating love and joy and compassion to those who you find difficult to love. It may be redeeming the time for Christ's glory. It may be being bold to speak about your faith. These are your battles. Unless you are committed to the daily disciplines of Christian living, you will fall into sin again. You will be angry and impatient with others. You will waste your time. Your mouth will not speak of Christ. It just won't happen.

Jesus said, "this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). But you might say, "Steve, that's hard to do!" Prayer takes a bunch of time. Fasting gives me headaches. I agree with you that it is hard. Of all the things that I do as a pastor each week, I find that my time spent in prayer to be as difficult as anything that I do. But, exercise is hard work for the athlete. Study is hard work for the student. Practice is hard work for the musician. And Jesus says that hard

work is the key to all spiritual power. Do you want to know why your Christian life is so weak? It's because your daily disciplines are weak. You show me someone strong in their daily disciplines, and I will show you one who's spiritual power is great. You show me someone weak in their daily disciplines, and I will show you someone who spiritual power is weak.

I think of the example of Thomas Watson. He was a great Puritan preacher and a man well known for his godliness. In a sermon on Phil. 2:12 ("Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"), he wrote,

> (v) Fifthly, work upon your knees; be much in prayer. Beg the Spirit of God to help you in the work; make that prayer, "Awake O north wind; and come, you south; blow upon my garden" (Song 4:16). We have need that this Spirit blow upon us, there being so many contrary winds blowing against us, and considering how soon holy affections are apt to wither. The garden has not more need of wind to make its fruit flow out, than we of the Spirit to make our graces flourish. ... To conclude all, pray to God to bless you in your work. "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong" (Eccl. 9: 11), nothing prospers without a blessing; and what way to obtain it but by prayer? It is a saying of one of the ancients, The saints carry the keys of heaven at their girdle. Prayer beats the weapon out of the enemy's hand, and gets the blessing out of God's hand.

What's great about this quote is that Thomas Watson practiced what he preached. He died in his prayer closet, praying.

How's your faith this morning? Is it weak and feeble? Then I exhort you to pray and fast. They are the means to spiritual strength and stability. I exhort you to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7). Faith doesn't simply happen. It comes through your constant pleading to God for faith. God will give you faith if you ask. Do you ask? In Mark's account of this story, there was a point where the boy's father says, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" Is this your prayer? I know that it is my constant prayer. I do believe God, but I desperately want my faith to increase, so I constantly pray that God would increase it.

I close by reading to you one of the great hymns of the faith that expresses the burden of my message this morning exactly. It is entitled, "What a Friend We

Have in Jesus," written by Joseph Scriven. It describes the benefits we lose when we fail to pray to our waiting Savior. These disciples lost their spiritual power when they refused to pray. When we fail to pray, we lose many things as well.

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 2, 2004 by Steve Brandon.
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