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Matthew 17:14 - 17:21



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

The passage of Matthew 17:14-21 recounts Jesus healing a demon-possessed boy after his disciples were unable to do so. Despite the boy's possessed state not being explicitly mentioned, it appears he suffered from epilepsy. When the man brings his son to Jesus, he expresses his frustration with the disciples' inability to help. The passage highlights how God allows evil spirits to act within certain limits and ultimately shows Jesus' divine power over the demonic realm.

Transcript

In Luke 17, we have the story next of Jesus and the disciples coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, and there encountering the nine disciples who had been left at the bottom of a mountain, and a crisis that they were facing, which they were obviously unequal to. But as usual, Jesus turns out to be more than equal to the crisis. The story begins at Matthew 17, verse 13.

This is immediately after the Transfiguration has occurred, and Jesus is coming down the hill with Peter and James and John. They've just had a conversation about John the Baptist and Elijah. And in verse 13, it says, Then Jesus answered and said, And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the child was cured from that very hour.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, So Jesus said to them, Now this is an interesting story if you find sensational miracles interesting. Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man, but before Jesus encounters him, nine of the disciples have encountered him. Well, I say man.

We don't know that this son was a man. He may have been a young boy still. We're not told.

In one of the other Gospels, there is more conversation recorded between Jesus and the Father. And Jesus says, How long has your son been in this condition? And the Father says, Since childhood. So the impression is that the son is perhaps not a child anymore, but a grown young man.

There's no specific information given as to his age. But while Jesus was up on the mountain with three of his disciples, the other nine were approached. And they were approached by this man who had a demon-possessed son.

Now what's interesting here, it does not immediately say that the son was demon-possessed. In fact, the description of the son's condition is as follows in verse 15, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic, and he suffers severely, and he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And now, later on, of course, Jesus cures him, and he does so by speaking to a demon.

And it says in verse 18, Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the child was cured from that very hour. Now, this, of course, gives us mixed messages. On the one hand, the child is called an epileptic.

On the other, he is said to have a demon, and the going out of the demon affects the cure. This could lead some people to conclude that epilepsy, when it occurs, is an instance of demon possession. Since this was a case where a young man is said to have epilepsy, and he obviously had a demon.

And the going out of the demon was the end of the epilepsy. So there can be little doubt that this person's epilepsy was caused by a demon. But would it be fair to assume that all persons who are epileptic have demons? I think not.

For one thing, it seems to me that a person's spiritual state is not at all indicated by the presence of epileptic seizures. And it would not be safe to assume that because of this case, of this young man having epilepsy and having a demon, that therefore everybody who has epilepsy must have a demon. There are other possibilities.

You see, in the Bible, we also find people who had deaf and dumb demons. And when the deaf and dumb demons were cast out, the dumb could speak and the deaf could hear. Now, it would certainly be wrong to suggest that all people who are deaf and dumb have demons.

And we find in the Gospel of Luke a woman who had a spirit of infirmity. And it was said that Satan had bound her by this spirit of infirmity. Sounds like a demonic condition.

And her condition was that she was bent over and could not stand upright. So she had either severe curvature of the spine or some other kind of back problem. And yet when Jesus cast the spirit out of her, she was set free and was agile again.

Now, these are instances in the Bible where people have demons, and the symptom of their demonism is a physical symptom, a handicap. Deafness, dumbness, being bent over and unable to stand up. Or in this case, epilepsy.

Now, one thing we can say, and I think we could say this with biblical authority, there are

people who are deaf and dumb who do not have demons. There are people who are blind and do not have demons. And in all likelihood, there are people who are epileptic and do not have demons.

It is simply going too far to try to extrapolate from this that all such cases are demonic. Now, it would also be going too far to suggest that no such cases are demonic. Now, we live in an age where the existence of demons is held in question by the educated elite, because demons, of course, represent the supernatural realm.

They are part of that supernatural realm. And we live in an age where the supernatural is doubted by many people. The philosophical system of materialism, which only allows for the material world to exist and not a non-material world, basically rules out the presence of demons.

Of course, the same philosophy rules out the presence of angels and of God himself, because God, as well as angels and demons, are part of the non-material realm. They are part of the spiritual realm. But whatever the mood of our day may be, the Bible is very clear that there are demonic spirits, that they are personal beings, and that when they do possess a person, there is usually some kind of marked torment in the person's life, some kind of marked change.

That is, there are symptoms of demons. Now, in the Bible, the symptoms of demons are not uniform. There are various ways in which demons manifest.

And that may be because there are different kinds of demons, or it may simply be that different demons have different modes of operation or different assignments. But we do find that sometimes a demon primarily affects behavior of a person. We think of the man of the tombs in the Scripture, who cut himself with sharp rocks and lived naked among the tombs and was very fierce and violent.

Obviously, that man's demon possession was evidenced by his behavior. However, there are cases in Scripture where a person's behavior is not mentioned as having anything to do with his demon possession, but rather he is afflicted in some physical sense. And this is the evidence of his demon possession.

And in this case, the young man was afflicted with epilepsy and was having seizures. Now, I'm sure many of those listening to my program today probably have epilepsy. I have several Christian friends I know who have epilepsy.

And it would be, as I say, it would be wrong to assume that all cases of epilepsy are caused by demons, but it would be equally wrong to assume that no cases of epilepsy are caused by demons, simply because in the Bible we know of at least one where epilepsy was caused by demons. Now, my conclusion about this is that demons can affect people and torment people in many different ways once they become in control of

a person's life. And some of those torments are of a spiritual nature and affect behavior.

Others are of a physical nature and simply affect the person's health or well-being. And therefore, a person might be afflicted by a dumb spirit or a deaf spirit or by an epileptic spirit. But those conditions can exist without demons.

There are organic conditions that correspond with those. But I think that we should just be informed from the scripture that in some cases demons are involved in what appears to be a physical affliction merely. And that was apparently the condition with this boy.

Now, his father had brought his son to the disciples of Jesus, who had on previous occasions cast demons out of people. Back in chapter 9 of Matthew, or chapter 10, excuse me, Jesus had sent out the 12 and he had given them power to cast out demons, and they did. Now, nine of those men seem unable to cast a demon out.

It even puzzles them. After it's all over, they ask Jesus, why were we not successful? Why couldn't we cast out the demon? He has to give them an answer. But here, this man brings the son to some men who should be able to help and they cannot help.

They are disciples of Jesus. They represent his work. They have on previous occasions done this kind of work before.

And so the man is hopeful. But when he brings his son to these men, they are impotent. They apparently command the demon to come out, I guess we could assume.

Well, we don't actually read of them doing so, but the demon just doesn't come out. The demon is resistant and the disciples are powerless. And no doubt humiliated, too.

Now, the man is getting concerned. Now, in other Gospels where this story is told, we are told that some of the scribes and Pharisees had shown up on the scene and were using this failure on the part of the disciples as an occasion to deride them and to cause arguments among them as to the authority that they profess to have and so forth. And Jesus came down and saw the dispute going on and he said, what's going on here? What are you discussing? And at that point, the man explained his problem.

Now, in the other Gospels, there is more detail of the conversation. And the man actually said to Jesus in one of the other Gospels that is recorded to Jesus, your disciples were unable to help my son, but if you are able, please help us, please do something. And Jesus said, if you are able, all things are possible to him who has faith.

And then we are told also in one of the other Gospels that Jesus saw the crowds were beginning to gather and that it was becoming a spectacle. And so rather than make it more of a spectacle than it already was, he simply went to the business at hand and commanded the demon to come out. And the young man who had the demon was convulsed by the demon going out.

And even later, they thought he was dead, but then he woke up or he got up and he was recovered. And this is the story. We have it somewhat abbreviated here in Matthew.

But Jesus, we see some things about Jesus here that are interesting to us. In verse 17, when he is first told that the disciples were unable to help this young man, Jesus said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to me. Now, we see something of Jesus, I guess we could say it appears to be irritation.

It seems to be that he is frustrated with his disciples. Now, it's not all that clear who he is speaking of when he speaks of the faithless generation. Was he criticizing this man who had brought his son? Or was he criticizing the scribes and Pharisees who were making a mockery of this deal? Or was he criticizing the disciples? I am of the opinion that he was disappointed with his disciples.

And that they are the one that he says, how long must I bear with you? After all, he didn't have to bear with this man and his son who had a demon for very long. But he did have to put up with his disciples and their failings for an extended period of time. Because he was training them to become the leaders of a new movement.

And how discouraging it must have gotten to Jesus from time to time. When he realized that his life was going to be so short. And he was going to have to leave everything that he had started in the hands of these men.

And yet these men seemed so seldom to get things right. So seldom to be able to do what they should do. And when he says, faithless and perverse generation.

That word faithless, I suspect, does refer to the disciples. Because later on, when they said, why couldn't we cast the demon out? He said, because of your unbelief. So it was their faithlessness.

On the other hand, he refers to them as a perverse generation. I don't think that Jesus would be inclined to call his disciples perverse. Though he certainly did refer to the Jews of his day as a general rule.

As being a perverse generation. A generation of vipers and so forth. John the Baptist before him had said those things.

And Jesus himself used those terms. So it would seem that maybe Jesus is addressing the Jewish race as a whole. Including the disciples to the extent that it applied to them.

That the whole Jewish race of his day. With the exception of a very small remnant. Were generally faithless and perverse.

But his disciples were not as perverse as others. Because they had turned and had

begun to follow him. But they still exhibited faithlessness at times.

And it was frustrating to him to find even in them. Not as great an exception as he might have hoped to the general rule. And so he does at times express what might look to us like impatience with the disciples.

When he was crossing the sea with them. And said to beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees. And the disciples misunderstood him.

And the way he corrected them sounds like he might have been a little bit frustrated. That they were not getting it yet. He says, are you still without understanding? And I guess that raises questions as to whether getting frustrated is a sin or not.

Because Jesus never sinned. And yet he does seem to express at least a wistful longing for an improvement. In the intelligence of his disciples or of their faith or whatever.

And he does seem to be a little impatient with them. But perhaps there is a form of impatience or a form of disillusionment that we would not call sin. Certainly anything Jesus did was not sin.

And we do feel that Jesus was, as we read this, we sort of instinctively feel that Jesus is a little bit irritated. When he says, oh faithless and perverse generation, how long must I bear with you? He certainly seems to be unhappy with the disciples on this occasion. And probably with the whole race of the Jews who were unable to deal with these situations even though Jesus had come.

And they should have, in the case of the disciples, they should have been able to walk in that power that he had given them before. To cast out demons. So we read in verse 18, and Jesus rebuked the demon.

And it came out of him. And the child was cured from that very hour. Now one of the gospels tells us the words that Jesus used.

And Jesus actually told the demon to come out and not to return. Which is an interesting thing because back in Matthew chapter 12, Jesus had said that when a demon goes out of a man, he goes through waterless places seeking a new home. And if he finds none, he comes back to the original place, to the original man.

And brings with him seven worse spirits than himself. And the latter end of that man is worse than the beginning. But in this case, Jesus actually told the demon to go out and not to come back.

Forbade it to come back. And therefore, we presume it must have had to wander endlessly unless it found another home in another person. Where would the demons find another home? We know that there are times when, for example, the demons asked

permission to be sent into the swine.

And Jesus gave them permission. And so they were sent into the swine. But isn't it interesting that they had to ask permission even to go into the swine? Would it not be so that they must ask permission especially to go into people? If God so controls and limits the activities of the demons that they cannot without his permission enter swine, then certainly it would appear that they could not without his permission enter people either, which are made in the image of God.

And yet, you know, whenever we read of people coming under the influence of evil spirits in the Old Testament, the Scripture always uses the phrase, an evil spirit from the Lord came against Saul. An evil spirit from the Lord stirred up the men of Shechem against Abimelech. An evil spirit from the Lord, a lying spirit from the Lord is in the mouth of Ahab's prophets or whatever.

Now, these evil spirits in the Old Testament are always said to have been from the Lord. And that surprises many Christians because we usually think that the spiritual realm is divided between two equal and warring powers, the Satan on one side with his demons and God on his side with his angels. And there's a sense in which that is true.

However, these are not equal powers. God is not equal to his adversary. He is infinitely superior.

Satan is a created being and limited. God is an uncreated and unlimited being. And therefore, Satan, although his efforts are arranged against God, does not have the power to act without God's allowance, without God permitting it.

And when God has sent evil spirits against people, it is because, according to 1 Kings chapter 22, the evil spirits approach God and ask permission to do it. And if God so wills to judge a person in this manner, he will allow the evil spirits to go against him. That is what we read, not only in the book of Job in the first two chapters, but also in 1 Kings chapter 22.

We find this also depicted so that evil spirits, when they do come upon people, in many cases, if not all, they're sent there as a judgment from God upon certain behaviors that those people have done. And even when they go into pigs, they have to receive permission from Jesus, as we saw in an earlier story. Now, Jesus told this demon to go out of the boy and not to come back in.

He did not give them permission to go into somewhere else, so it's not clear where they went. You remember when Jesus encountered Legion, the demons in Legion begged Jesus not to send them to the pit, to the abyss. And perhaps that's the natural place where they would have been sent.

And maybe that's where these ones had to go when they left this young man. We would

lapse too much into speculation if we were to try to go into too much detail as to what happened to these demons after they left the man. The Bible doesn't tell us.

But, of course, the whole realm of the demonic is frequently spoken of in Scripture, especially the Gospels and the book of Acts. But notwithstanding the Scripture speaking often on the subject, it does not answer all the questions we would like to have answered. Now, the disciples, of course, after this was all over, came to Jesus and said, well, why couldn't we cast the demon out? You know, I've been involved on a few occasions dealing with demon-possessed people.

And on a few occasions, I've seen success. I've seen the demons cast out successfully. There have been a few cases where they did not appear to be cast out successfully.

And I've had the same question, Lord, why did the demons not come out? And I don't know that the answer would always be the same answer. Jesus certainly answered the disciples on this occasion. But there are perhaps other occasions where other factors could be present.

But in this case, Jesus said, quite plainly, because of your unbelief. Which means that not only does God respond to us by faith, but even the demons apparently respond to us on the basis of our faith. If our faith is lacking in God, then the demons themselves seem to disregard.

And we know of at least that case in Acts chapter 19 where the seven sons of Sceva tried to command a demon to come out of a man. And they even used the name of Jesus, but they didn't know Jesus. They didn't have any faith in him.

And, of course, they were soundly humiliated. So, faith is the issue. Now, Jesus did say this kind does not come out but by prayer and fasting.

In verse 21. However, you will notice if you look carefully in your Bible, that phrase, prayer and fasting, is not found in some of the manuscripts. So, it's not clear whether Jesus actually made reference to prayer and fasting there.

But he certainly did make reference to unbelief. And we can say that, as James said, if anyone does not believe, then he shall not receive anything from the Lord.