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TO MOVE UP YOU HAVE TO MOVE FORWARD!

Today's Text: Matt. 17: 14- 27

Extracts:

And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; ... So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." Then Jesus answered and 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." 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, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for, assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out, except by prayer and fasting" [Matt. 17: 14-21]

In response to a number of recent developments, such as loss of job, divorce or empty nest (i.e., grown children moving out of their parents' homes), a good number of American women are returning to school to acquire higher qualifications.¹ Even President Obama is offering an additional incentive of \$10,000 scholarship free for women and mothers to take advantage of completing their college education. What has prompted this trend? The affected women have discovered that, in order to achieve their dreams of better jobs and better pay, they need to upgrade their skills. In order to climb up to better opportunities, they have to move forward in their skills development.

Have you had the privilege to watch planes take off in an airport? They first have to race forward on the tarmac before they can soar like a bird into the sky and away from view. Is it not the same thing that we do in every aspect of life when we want progress? Yet, when it comes to doing spiritual exploits, we want to perform wonders without first growing our faith. It is no wonder that after so many years in the church, we have nothing to show for it. We cannot even pray for ourselves, not to talk of others. In this week's study, the disciples that had been with Jesus for three years could not heal a sick person. Let us find out why!

¹ Read, for example, "Returning to School- Going Back to College," http://womensissues.about.com/od/returningtoschool/Returning_to_School_Going_Back_to_College.htm and Miranda Watson, "Obama Wants All Women to Return Back to School- Get a \$10,000 Scholarship Free," [http://ezinearticles.com/?Obama-Wants-All-Women-to-Return-Back-to-School-Get-a-\\$10,000-Scholarship-Free&id=2530583](http://ezinearticles.com/?Obama-Wants-All-Women-to-Return-Back-to-School-Get-a-$10,000-Scholarship-Free&id=2530583)

1. Background: That you know about Jesus doesn't mean you know Him!

Jesus was returning with Peter, James and John from His Transfiguration experience when a man, out of the multitude waiting for Jesus ran forward, knelt before Him and said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic; and suffers severely, for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him" [Matt. 17: 14-16]. Jesus replied him, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." Jesus rebuked the demon and "it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour" [vv. 17-18].

His disciples were certainly dumbfounded that Jesus had so easily done what they had tried unsuccessfully to do in His name. So, they came to Him privately and asked, "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus replied them, "*Because of your unbelief*; for if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" [vv. 19- 20].

We can forgive outsiders, the faithless and perverse generation of those who do not know Jesus and do not even desire to come close unless and until they have insurmountable problems (beyond human solutions). But what do we say of those that are supposedly close to Him, those who profess to be His followers? The disciples in question had been with Jesus for three years. Yet, He told them that they were unable to cast out the demon in that man because of their unbelief! That is, they had no faith. That was a serious indictment. Let us pay attention to the following matters arising:

a) *Faith is not measured by size but by use!*

The disciples could have been shocked to hear Jesus say that they had no faith. After all, some of them were among the twelve that He had sent out to "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead (and) *cast out demons*" [Matt. 10: 8]. Some of them were among the seventy that He had sent out two by two to go "into every city and place where He Himself was about to be" to "heal the sick there." On that occasion, they had returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name" [Lk 10: 1, 9, 17]. So, why did He say that they had no faith for being unable to cast out the demon in the epileptic?

Of course, Jesus was referring to their use of faith, not the size of it. That was why He used the analogy of the mustard seed [Matt. 17:20]. The mustard seed is only 2 millimetres in diameter. When it is planted under favourable conditions, it is persistent in growth and can crack concrete.² So, the problem is not with size but its use. For example, we clamour for taller than shorter or bigger than smaller, - except perhaps in body size!

² Mustard Seed, From Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustard_seed

Yet, we know that, all things equal, success is randomly distributed among humans, irrespective of the size of their natural faculties or talents. The difference lies in effective use.

b) *The content of your faith influences how you use it!*

Some of us claim to have faith in God or Jesus but when we face a situation to exercise it, we chicken out! For example, they may wheel a cripple into your church during service and your pastor asks you to lead prayers of healing for that person. But, deep down in you, a thought keeps flashing, “What if I pray and nothing happens?” In the end, you join everyone else to pray and nothing really happens! What has gone wrong?

Let us use some biblical examples to make that point more clearly:

- When the Shunammite woman’s son died, the prophet Elisha sent his servant, Gehazi, to go ahead of him and lay his staff on the face of the dead child. Gehazi did so “but there was neither voice nor hearing.” He went back to his master and reported, “The child has not awakened!” But when the prophet himself went there and prayed to the Lord, “the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes” [2 Kgs 4: 29-35]. Gehazi did as he was told but did he have confidence in what he did? I doubt. In fact, as it later turned out, Gehazi was in the prophetic ministry of Elisha largely for pecuniary gains [2 Kgs 5: 20-27]. God will not prosper the work of those who want to use signs and wonders for their self-aggrandizement.
- In the church at Corinth, God worked “unusual miracles by the hands of Paul” such that handkerchiefs and aprons taken from his body were sent to the sick, the diseased and the demon-possessed outside of the synagogue and they all became healed.” Now, some Jewish exorcists, notably the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, called on the name of Jesus on those who had evil spirits, saying, “We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.” The evil spirit in one man replied, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” The mad man pounced on them and overpowered them until they were torn naked and wounded [Acts 19: 11-16]! There are many exorcists in the church today who pretend to be calling on the name of Jesus to do exploits but He does not know them because they are lawless workers of iniquity [Matt. 7: 20-23].
- On the other hand, look at the cases of Peter and Paul. In the temple in Jerusalem, Peter and John came across a lame man who asked them for alms. Instead, Peter offered him healing, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” See what followed. After that prayer, Peter “took him by the right hand

and lifted him up; and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength,” and the man was healed [Acts 3: 1-8]. Peter had faith in Jesus and acted on it. The lame man saw Peter’s confidence and he himself believed that he would be healed. Compare that with Paul’s experience in the synagogue at Lystra. A cripple (from his mother’s womb) listened intently to Paul’s sermon. Paul “observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, ‘Stand up straight on your feet!’” The man leaped up and walked [Acts 14: 8-10]. Here, the faith of the seeker emboldened the healer to exercise his own faith, the same way that the faith of a patient in her doctor can make a major difference in her speedy recovery.

From the forgoing, we can appreciate better the response of our Lord to both the man whose son was sick and His own disciples who could not cast out the demon. A faithless and perverse generation only looks for Christ when their human contraptions fail and they are scared of the unknown. If the scribes and Pharisees could do it, that man would not look for Jesus. We keep asking God to increase our faith [Lk 17: 5] without justifying what we have done with what we have received. Our faith is not measured by its size but by how we exercise it [Rom. 12: 3-8]. The only way that can happen is when you move forward, that is, go to where God is waiting for you to perform His purpose. He told Abram, to leave his country, family and house and move to a land that He would show him, where He would make his name great, and through him, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” [Gen. 12: 1-3]. The next time that God spoke with Abram was after his arrival in the new land, Canaan [v. 7]. On the day of His ascension to heaven, Jesus commanded His disciples not to depart from Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit [Acts 1: 4]. Therefore, *moving forward can be measured by physical distance or patience or hard preparation, among others*. That is why the word of God says that faith without works is dead [Jam. 2: 26].

2. Your forward movement: By Faith- update not Faith-compatible!

Faith is so important to God that without it you cannot please Him [Heb. 11: 6].³ *At the heart of faith is obedience*. That is why Abraham has been called the father of all believers [Rom. 4: 16]. He waited for 25 years (until the age of 100) to have Isaac, his child of promise. Many of us cannot do it because we go for “faith-compatibles” instead of “faith-upgrades”! We can use our knowledge of computers to illustrate the difference.

Some years back, you may recall that IBM dominated the computer market, to the extent that other manufacturers had to make sure that their products were IBM-

³ For a more detailed study, read, “Walking by Faith,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 1 No. 6: 14 Oct. 2000; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/Walkingbyfaith.pdf

compatible or they would be out of business.⁴ In that sense, a compatible is not the real thing but a look-alike or a ‘behave-alike.’ A compatible is okay as long as there are no frequent changes in competition. In due course, however, the success of Microsoft Windows has driven nearly all other rival commercial operating systems into near-extinction, and has ensured that the “IBM PC compatible” computer remains dominant. So now we hear of Microsoft updates, such as *XP* and *Vista*. Even in software, you have updates, such as *Microsoft Office 2003* now upgraded to 2007. Before you know it, you find that some people on older versions cannot open attachments that you send to them from your newer versions. In that case, unless you update frequently, you can easily fall behind. There is a similar experience in the spiritual realm.

When you received Christ, you were red hot! When you prayed for self or others, signs and wonders followed. But along the way, something may have happened to your faith. Perhaps, the cares of this world or trials and persecutions could have taken your eyes off the ball. It is possible that you have succumbed to sexual immorality or pursuit of material things that has made your place of worship more user-friendly than God-fearing. Or there may be a big leadership crisis in your church that has forced you to take a firm stand for your spiritual mentor even when he is wrong by God’s word.

In such circumstances, you can be faith-compatible by doing what you have always done. For example, you do only what will please your pastor, even when it is spiritually troubling to you. You ensure that your public image is one of piety even when you do dirty things in secret! Just as the computer compatible is good for as long as the reference computer is good, your faith can be shattered when the hypocrisy is revealed. By their fruits, we shall know them. You have not moved forward but instead have deteriorated or remained stagnant. When Satan comes with his troubles, he can overwhelm you because your faith has not moved forward. How then can you move up to cast him and his demons out? Only those who know their God shall be strong and do exploits [**Dan. 11: 32**].

On the other hand, you can do faith upgrade. In this case, you are always on the move to higher spiritual grounds. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God [**Rom. 10: 17**]. So, you consume His word as recorded in the Bible because you accept it as His inspiration that is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and for instruction in righteousness so that you “may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” [**2 Tim. 3: 16-17**]. You have put on the whole armour of God, consisting of the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation and shoes for spreading the good news of the Gospel instead of rumours. With the whole armour activated and upgraded, you are in a position to wrestle with Satan and his dark forces [**Eph. 6: 10-17**]. You have thereby primed up your spiritual ears by doing only what God tells you to do because obedience is better than

⁴ “IBM PC Compatible,” From Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBM_PC_compatibles

sacrifice [1 Sam. 15: 22-24]. You move when He tells you to move; you stay on one spot for as long as He tells you to do so. You forgive your enemies because He has commanded you to do so. You love your neighbours as yourself because He said so. Is that too hard to do? Yes, if you are carnally-minded. No, if you are led by the Spirit of God [Gal. 5: 16-23].

3. Conclusion: It is only by prayer and fasting!

On why the disciples could not cast out the demon that caused epileptic attacks on a man's son, Jesus said that it was due to their unbelief. He added, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" [Matt. 17: 21]. Yet, these were disciples that had walked with Him for three years. How about us who have only read about Him that walked on the earth over two thousand years ago?

What fasting is Jesus talking about? In the days of Isaiah, the people of Israel asked God, "Why have we fasted ... and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?" The Lord replied that fasting, in His sight, was not punishing your body but "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free," and that they break every yoke. In addition, they should share their bread with the hungry, bring the poor and outcasts into their homes, and cover the naked. If they did those things, then their "light (would) break forth like the morning, (their) healing (would) spring forth speedily; (their) righteousness (would) go before (them); (and) the glory of the Lord (would) be (their) rear guard." Then they would call and the Lord would answer; they would cry and He would say to them, "Here I am" [Is. 58: 3-9].

You want God to hear your prayers. You want signs and wonders to follow you. Then you must believe in and do what Jesus asks you to do. *Obedience is the only fasting that is acceptable to God.* That is the meaning of faith in His name. Therefore, in His name, you will be able to cast out demons and when you lay hands on the sick, they will recover [Mk 16: 15-18].

Move your faith forward if you want to move up spiritually.