

Unstoppable Faith

Matthew 17:14-20

1 March 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: Faith in Jesus gives us power to defeat evil.

Big Question: How can we deal with evil?

Introduction

Auqaman, Batman, Batwoman, Black Panther, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Catwoman, Green Lantern, Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, Spiker-man, Superman, Supergirl, Thor, Wolverine, Wonder Woman – they're just some of the superheroes that grace our screens.

Is it just me, or does it seem like there are more superhero movies coming out now than ever before?

One website I looked at said that there's going to be at least EIGHT new Superhero movies released this year.

Superheroes are big part of popular culture – the same culture that quietly laughs at the Ancients and their stories of gods fighting out the battle between good and evil.

Superhero stories capture our imaginations because they speak to something deep inside all of us.

The great battle that we all experience in our own lives is revealed in these movies.

At their most basic level, they're about good overcoming evil, even in the face of all kinds of challenges.

There's something inside of us that longs for all the wrongs in the world to be dealt with.

We long for a superhero to come, intervene and make everything right.

Outline

Matthew was a friend of Jesus who wrote down an account of his life and ministry.

We've been working our way through this book, slowly building a clearer picture of who Jesus is.

The account builds as Matthew recounts a number of the impressive miracles Jesus performed: he's no ordinary man.

All of this was pointing to his true identity which was revealed to Peter in the great confession of chapter sixteen.

Jesus is God's Messiah, God's superhero sent to act on his behalf, right all the wrongs in the world and bring peace and security.

Yet he's not a superhero who's going to take the easy road.

His victory is going to be achieved by suffering and being killed.

That was a lot for the poor disciples to take in and it's a lot for us to get our heads around too.

But wait, there's more.

Last week, in the first part of chapter seventeen, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain where they got more than they bargained for – a glimpse of his glory.

Jesus is worthy of all the same glory as God himself.

Before their very eyes, Jesus changed and became bright, before he was joined with two big wigs from the Old Testament – Moses and Elijah.

Jesus is the Messiah that the prophets pointed to, confirmed and approved by God himself speaking from heaven.

This week, we see what happens when they come back down to reality.

Now that Jesus has been revealed as God's king, a new phase of ministry begins.

Jesus unpacks what kingdom living looks like.

If the kingdom is coming, what does it look like to live as a citizen in the king's kingdom?

The rest of chapter seventeen probably belongs together as a single section, but we're only going to get up to verse twenty this week.

We'll get to the rest next week, but I expect that this passage throws up a whole bunch of questions for most of us.

Our questions aren't really the main point of what's going on here, but we're going to slow down anyway, rather than just skating over the top of them.

The key thing that's going on here is that **faith in Jesus gives us power to defeat evil.**

- The Powerlessness of Faith in Ourselves (vv14-16)
- The Power Jesus has Over Evil (vv17-18)
- The Power of Faith in Jesus (vv19-20)

The Powerlessness of Faith in Ourselves (vv14-16)

With the events on top of the mountain fresh in their minds, Jesus and his little gang come back down the mountain where they meet up with the other disciples who'd been left behind.

The crowds have found them again too, after being left behind at the edge of the lake at the beginning of chapter sixteen.

In Matthew's gospel, 'the crowds' are the people who are interested in Jesus, but not interested enough to get involved.

These random onlookers are never far away.

However, there's one man who's different from all the rest.

Pushing his way through the crowd, he comes up to Jesus and kneels down before him in a very respectful way.

This guy's humbly coming to Jesus with a request for mercy, verse 15:

Matthew 17:15 (NIV11) ¹⁵ "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water."

His son – and it's likely that this was his only son – was suffering from seizures.¹

A one-off fit would be scary enough, but we're told that this was something that was happening to him often.

When the fits and seizures came on, his son suffered greatly.

More than that, there was the very real danger that he'd get seriously hurt by falling into a fire or into the water.

There are few things more terribly excruciating as a parent than seeing your child in danger and being powerless to help.

After a complicated pregnancy, our youngest daughter was born quite early.

This birth was different to the others – there was a sense of panic in the room and the moment she was born, the medical staff whisked her away.

I wasn't sure if she was alive or dead.

The next couple of hours were excruciating as I watched the doctor manually give her each breath as I watched on in agony.

I was powerless to do anything but watch on, praying to God and hoping that the doctors could keep her alive.

The problem was that his son had been mooned.

No, he wasn't mooned in the way that you're thinking of.

The word Matthew uses to describe this condition is quite rare – the only other examples we have are from Matthew 4:24 and in an astrologer from the second century AD.

In the ancient world, they believed that being struck by the moon was the cause of a whole range of erratic behaviours.

That's why you get some translations describing him as a lunatic – 'luna' is the Latin for moon.

We hear that and most of us probably chuckle to ourselves on the inside because we think that's a bit of a ridiculous explanation, isn't it?

It's easy to assume that ancient people were just uninformed.

It sounds very much like the kid had the medical condition that we typically know as epilepsy.

With the medical science we have now, we know how to treat epilepsy and so we don't need to rely on blaming it on things like the moon.

If someone turned up here with a child suffering like that, I think that most of us would be telling them to go to the emergency department.

Thinking that this is just epilepsy – and blaming this on nothing more than on chemical reactions, genes and physiology – is just as ridiculous as blaming it on the moon.

Mark's account of these same events (which appear in Luke too) make it very clear that this is more than just epilepsy.

The demon wants to deliberately hurt the boy, looking for every opportunity to harm him.²

If you take what the Bible is saying here seriously, then there was a supernatural cause.

The cause of the problem in this case – according to verse eighteen – is a demon.

Demons are manifestations of evil.

They're servants of Satan and opposed to God.

We don't know what they look like and exactly how they operate.

Peter tells us that we've been given everything we need for life and godliness, but the Bible doesn't have all that much to say about demonology.³

There are real spiritual forces at work in the world that we can't see.

In the Western world, we tend deny it which is just how the Evil One likes it.

In other parts of the world, people are much more advanced in this area than we are in the West.

They're more attuned to this stuff than we are and so the evil one uses it to do his work, whereas for us he generally uses different tactics.

In his famous fictional work *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis describes what he thinks it would look like for two demons to have a conversation about how to best to carry out their evil plans:

My Dear Wormwood, I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient in ignorance of your own existence. That question, at least for the present phase of the struggle, has been answered for us by

the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics. At least, not yet.⁴

It would be foolish to be looking for a demon behind every sickness and illness.

I don't think that we're meant to take from this that EVERY sickness is caused by a demon.

We're not even meant to think that these particular symptoms are always spiritual.

But it could be that there is something demonic.

Over the last few decades, we've become increasingly aware of how our physical and mental health are connected.

I think it's right and reasonable to say that our physical and mental health is also connected to our spiritual health as well.

I don't know about you, but that makes me feel deeply uncomfortable.

This condition can't just be explained and fixed by medical science and a supernatural power is needed.

It's convenient for us to reduce everything to a medical condition because it means that the cause is never us and certainty never our sin.

If it's possible that there is a supernatural cause, then it means that I'm powerless to control it.

We're all control-freaks to some degree or another and we even express that in the way that we want to explain what's going on in this text.

Are we scared and feeling confronted by something that we're powerless over?

This guy knows that he's powerless to fix his son's condition.

The best he can do is manage the situation by monitoring him around the clock.

But he couldn't fix the root of the problem.

His only hope was to come to Jesus, asking for mercy.

His deep concern for his only son has brought him to God's only son.

This bloke isn't the only one who's powerless though.

In his effort to get some relief for his son, he'd tried going to Jesus' disciples, verse sixteen.

Presumably this was the other nine disciples who didn't go on the jaunt up the mountain.

We know that they were experienced at dealing with this kind of thing because at the start of chapter ten, we read about how Jesus sent them out:

Matthew 10:1 (NIV11) ¹ Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

When this man came to them though, they couldn't remove this demon.

They gave it their best shot, but they didn't have the power.

Probably no one was more surprised than the disciples themselves.

There was probably no one more disappointed than this man and his son.

Why were they were powerless to help when they'd done it before?

It must've been confronting for Pete, Jack and Jim to come down the mountain.

They'd just seen the power and glory of Jesus.

Now they could see the stark contrast of the powerlessness of his disciples.

We like to kid ourselves that we're in control of everything, that we've got the power to fix anything that comes our way.

Telling ourselves that we can deal with any situation is a great comfort to us.

We've got university degrees, we've got business sense, we've got physical power.

The mantra of our time is "Look inside yourself for the solution."

Listen to how M People sang it in the '90s:

*But it's then, then that faith arrives
To make you feel at least alive.
And that's why you should keep on aiming high,
Just seek yourself and you will shine.*

*You've got to search for the hero inside yourself,
Search for the secrets you hide.
Search for the hero inside yourself
Until you find the key to your life.⁵*

We like to think that we're strong and powerful.

Many of us go through our teens, twenties and thirties thinking that we're invincible.

And then in our forties, we find out that things don't quite work as well as they used to.

we're not quite as powerful as we thought.

It's not just age, other events happen that remind us that we're not in control.

Someone I know had a commercial gardening business.

He was a very hard worker and physically strong.

He's got a good head for business and everything was going well in his thriving business.

Until the day that he found out he had cancer.

The way he describes it, in fifteen minutes everything he'd worked for the last ten years for was gone.

And it was completely out of his control.

By his own admission, spiritually, it's one of the best things that's ever happened to him.

The cancer treatment isn't fun, but it's taught him that he's not in control.

I'm thankful for medical doctors and researchers, for all the amazing stuff they can do.

A guy I grew up with was on the news last week for pioneering a new medical technique that will prolong the lives of lung transplant patients.

But there are still limits on what humanity can achieve.

Human smarts don't look like we're going to be able to contain this virus.

Although we can prolong life, we're powerless to stop death.

Death is the ultimate thing that we're powerless to deal with.

We're mere mortals and it's important to recognise that.

It humbles us and reminds us that we're not God.

The disciples are like Captain Kirk saying, "We need more power, Scotty."

It's not just true of them, it's also true of us.

But Scotty can't help us. Only Jesus can.

The Power Jesus has Over Evil (vv17-18)

Having seen the powerlessness of this father and the disciples, we now see the power of Jesus himself.

Jesus heals where he faithless disciples had failed.

The Christ has power over evil.

Last week, we talked about the similarities between the transfiguration and Moses going up on the mountain to get the law as recorded in the book of Exodus.

What happened when Moses came back down from the mountain?

He found that in his absence, their faithlessness caused them to create a golden calf to worship.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus comes down from the mountain here and finds equally unfaithful men waiting?

How will Jesus respond to this situation?

Jesus doesn't seem pleased at all in verse seventeen.

In fact, he sounds quite exasperated.

Matthew 17:17 (NIV11) ¹⁷ "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me."

Jesus is grieved by how faithlessness this whole generation is.

Unbelieving could also be translated as 'unfaithful'.

Who's 'this generation'?

It's first and foremost the disciples, but really everyone who has the same unbelief.

I read this and kind of wonder if the Son of God is really allowed to talk like that?

Is this an example of his "human side" winning out against his divine side?

Actually, no. It's an accurate description of what we're like.

And even though it's not pretty, this's exactly the kind of language that God the Father uses to describe his people in the Old Testament.

Numbers 14:26–27 (NIV11) ²⁶ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: ²⁷ "How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites.

Deuteronomy 32:5 (NIV11) ⁵They are corrupt and not his children; to their shame they are a warped and crooked generation.

He knew what he was doing when he humbled himself to come to earth, but his disciples were really making him question that decision at this point.

Then again, that's the whole reason that he came to earth.

He is the faithful God who had to step in because of humanity's unfaithfulness.

Although it pains him to have to experience it, that's what ultimately drives him to the pain of the cross.

Jesus doesn't turn this man away although that's kind of what I'd be expecting him to do.

Jesus never turns the hard cases of healing away though.

He's not at all threatened by the situation, coming up with some kind of excuse because he thinks this one might be beyond his ability.

Jesus rejects no one and so he asks for the boy to be brought to him.

In the movies, the fight between good and evil is usually shown as a mighty battle.

That's what happens in the superhero movies, isn't it?

Good and evil lock swords in an epic battle.

But that's not what we see here.

Jesus clearly has mastery over the demon.

He can remove it simply by REBUKING it with his words.

He doesn't have to say a long spell and hope for the best – he can deal with evil in a straightforward manner.

Jesus heals where the faithless disciples had failed.

Matthew 17:18 (NIV11) ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.

The removal and healing is instantaneous and he doesn't even need any medical supplies.

The healing is complete and the boy was able to go off and do the kind of dangerous things that boys like to do (and possibly break his arm in the process).

This shows that the problem isn't that the demon can't be removed.

It's a matter of power.

Jesus can defeat this evil that the disciples were unable to.

And it's a foretaste and reminder of what he's about to do.

At this point in his ministry, the cross is never far away – it's talked about in verses 22 and 23.

On the cross, Jesus confronted evil and more importantly overcome it.

He defeated every evil power so that the fate of devil and his minions is now secured.

At the cross, Jesus obliterated even death itself.

How about you and I? How do we confront evil?

We need to start with ourselves.

The Bible says that we all do evil which the Bible calls sin.

We take what God says is good and we call it evil and we take what's evil and call it good.

We need to repent of this rebellion and ask Jesus for forgiveness.

What about us casting out demons?

This isn't the main thrust of the passage, but we'll take some time to say something.

I have little personal experience to go on in this area, but I'll also draw on the experience of others.

The first thing to say is that dealing with demons is a minor theme in the Bible.

In the Bible, there's some dealing with demonic activity before the Cross, but post-Easter there's far less.

There's not none – there are two cases in the book of Acts – but there's no specific mention in the New Testament letters.

And while there's Jesus' commission to the disciples in chapter twelve, he gives a very different one in chapter 28.

The apostles seem to be focused much more on the cross and resurrection.

The cross seems to be a major turning point.

The big question is, "Can someone today be demon possessed?"

I think that the answer is "Yes, that's a possibility".

HOWEVER, expect it to be very rare, especially here in the West where the devil can be much more effective by being subversive in other ways.

Most experience pastors in western cultures I've heard talk about this can count the number of times they think they might've seen demon possession on one hand.

How do we deal with it if we think we are dealing with someone who's demon possessed?

With caution so that we don't become obsessed OR deniers.

Apart from anything else, we need to be very, very careful of damage we can do when we tell someone that they're demon possessed.

And demon possession has been used as way of spiritually abusing people, so we need to be careful.

People I respect seem to be a bit divided on whether there's a place for ekballistic exorcism of the type that's used here.⁶

At this point, I'd like to reserve the right to make a judgement based on the individual circumstances.

I think everyone would agree that the normal way of dealing with demons to gently point people to the gospel.

It's the gospel – pointing people to how Jesus has defeated evil at the cross – which has power.

We do that by teaching them from the Scriptures (and not our own advice), asking that God would open their spiritual eyes and set them free.

As Paul writes to Timothy.

2 Timothy 2:25–26 (NIV11) ²⁵ Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Jesus has to be at the centre of whatever we do because he's the one who has power over evil.

The Power of Faith in Jesus (vv19-20)

That's Jesus. What about us?

It's a natural question to ask and it turns out it was pretty much the question the disciples asked too.

True spiritual power comes from faith in Jesus.

The main focus in this passage isn't so much the actual healing, so much as the disciples and their faith.

They pull Jesus off to the side to have a little chat with him in private.

Remember that Peter did the same thing a week or so earlier in chapter sixteen.⁷

They wanted to know, verse nineteen, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

I suspect that at best they were puzzled, but more likely they were a bit embarrassed by what they'd just seen Jesus do.

He was able to drive out the demon and they can't work out why they couldn't.

It wasn't that they weren't willing to help the bloke out. They'd tried and failed.

It wasn't that they hadn't had enough experience because they'd been able to get rid of demons before.

And it wasn't that Jesus wasn't there with them because he wasn't with them when he'd sent them out on previous occasions.

Jesus gives them the reason in verse 20.

He tells them it's because they have 'little' faith.

That's exactly how Jesus described Peter when he took a few steps on the Sea of Galilee before starting to sink.⁸

What is 'little faith'?

Well, it's not having no faith at all.

The crowds have no faith, but the disciples clearly do have some faith.

The thing is that the kind of faith they have really isn't that much better than no faith at all.

Little faith isn't a question of quantity, it's an issue of quality.

The problem is that they had an emaciated, poor-quality faith.

This's really important because we've all come across Christians whose answer to defeating evil is that we just need to have more faith.

That's actually not the answer at all because it means that ultimately the power rests on us and what we do.

That kind of view is sincere but misguided because Jesus makes clear that it's not about how much faith you have.

A mustard seed was the smallest seed known at the time (as we know from when Jesus used it as an example in chapter thirteen).

Jesus says that with faith the size of a mustard seed, you can make a mountain move.

You don't need a large faith. A small faith is enough.

Matthew 17:20 (NIV11) ²⁰ He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Moving a mountain sounds quite impressive, doesn't it?

Jesus had just been up a great mountain, so it's not surprising that it was on his mind.

It should make us pause a little though to think that Jesus never moved a mountain.

Nor did any of the apostles, early church fathers, reformers or anyone in church history for that matter.

Moving a mountain is an idiom for getting through tough times and overcoming great difficulties.

Genuine faith can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Jesus is saying that with even a small amount of faith, you can will be victorious over all evil.

The quality of the faith depends on who you have faith in.

Faith depends on the object of that faith.

The weakness of faith comes from putting your trust in the wrong place.

Greater faith isn't built on being more certain that God will grant the request.

It's the kind of faith that depends on God to provide everything we need.

They were trusting in their own ability to be able to get rid of demons.

They thought that their power was some kind of magic that they could do on their own, completely separate from Jesus.

They were trusting in their own skill and that's what made it a deficient faith.

They were big on self and little on Jesus.

They only need to have a small amount of faith, but it will be effective if it's placed on the right person.

Power to defeat evil doesn't come from us, it comes from the Lord Jesus.

Jesus didn't look very impressive.

He wasn't the conquering kind of Messiah that they were expecting.

And when he went to the cross, it looked like a foolish death.

It still does today – how ridiculous does it sound that you'd put your trust in some bloke who got executed in the Middle East a couple of thousand years ago?

Yet it was at the cross that he had the full and final victory over evil.

That's why we need to have faith in the foolishness of the cross.

Richard Dawkins would be one of the most famous New Atheists around today.

For him, faith is something that's really dirty, he really doesn't like faith at all.

Or so he says.

*Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence ... Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument.*⁹

You might be surprised to hear that I think that there's actually some truth to what Dawkins says.

There is a brand of faith that's peddled as Christian saying that you've got to suspend all your rational thinking and blindly believe.

It's just that isn't Biblical faith.

Biblical faith doesn't just reach out into the dark.

It's built on the evidence of the testimony of the people who were there to see and hear and touch the Risen Lord Jesus.

Biblical faith says that we put our trust in the God who's spoken in the events of the cross and shown himself to have defeated evil.

The irony is that the kind of faith that Dawkins detests is exactly the kind of faith he himself uses.

Faith is really just another word for trust.

He puts his trust in the research and findings of a multitude of other scientists and their subjective reading of the data.

He has to rely on the testimony of others who are experts in fields that he doesn't work in.

Most of all, he puts a whole heap of faith in himself.

He trusts in his own ability to reason and understand and make sense of the world.

That's what gives him an excuse to – in his own words – “evade the need to think and evaluate evidence.”

He determinedly pursues his beliefs “in spite of” the evidence.

Jesus isn't just some ancient version of George Michael singing, “You've gotta have faith.”

It needs to be faith in Jesus.

We get life in Jesus by faith and we continue to live in Jesus by faith.

They don't need great faith, tiny faith will do.

But they do need true faith in Jesus himself.

Where is your faith?

Is your faith directed towards Jesus or yourself?

Who do you trust in?

Are you like the disciples who thought they were trusting in Jesus but found that they couldn't defeat evil because they were really trusting in themselves?

Jesus says that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for you

Really?

Does that mean it's not impossible for me to get a new Beamer?

That if I have faith, I can fly if I'd really like to?

No, it means that mustard seed faith in Jesus unlocks kingdom power.

What's kingdom power, you ask?

It means that there is no kind of evil that can stand in your way.

That's pretty amazing, isn't it?

No evil power can beat us.

Jesus said in chapter sixteen that he will build his church and that the gates of Hades will not defeat it.

What that means is that we don't have anything to fear because Jesus has already defeated death at the cross.

We saw that means that death won't win.

Oh no! There's a verse missing from your Bible.

Have a look down at your footnote and you'll see that it says something like "Some manuscripts include here words similar to Mark 9:29.

And all the King James Bible Only people say that's why we've got a perverted translation because there's a verse missing.

The evidence slightly favours that these words probably weren't there in the original version of Matthew.

Even if they were there, it still makes sense and wouldn't change anything.

Prayer and dependence on Jesus is the key.

The Christian has power over evil through faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

The world is full of superhero movies.

We're drawn in by the stories of good winning over evil.

In this passage, we have something better than a superhero story.

Jesus's victory over evil empowers everyone who's part of his kingdom.

The king's rule means that we don't have to worry about defeat.

We can all have that by trusting in Jesus.

¹ Luke 9:38

² Mark 9:22

³ 2 Peter 1:3

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fount, 1994).

⁵ M People, *Search for the Hero*, 1994.

⁶ This comes from the Greek word *ekballo* which means to cast or drive out.

⁷ Matthew 16:22

⁸ Matthew 14:31

⁹ SCAG — 'A scientist's case against God' — an edited version of Dr Dawkins' speech at the Edinburgh International Science Festival on 15 April 1992, published in *The Independent*, 20 April 1992

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Matthew 17:14-20

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Big Idea: Faith in Jesus gives us power to defeat evil.

Big Question: How can we deal with evil?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some reasons that superhero movies might be so popular?
2. Why was this man's son suffering?
3. Was Jesus being ungodly in the way he responded in verse seventeen?
4. Why couldn't the disciples heal this boy?
5. What does Jesus mean when he says that the disciples have 'little faith' (v20)?
6. Can you really move Mt Kosciuszko with faith the size of a mustard seed?
7. Do you think that Jesus was just exaggerating when he says, "Nothing will be impossible for you"?
8. Why isn't verse 21 there in many Bibles?
9. How can you tell if someone is demon possessed?
10. Suggest some thoughts on how to respond in the following situations:
 - a. You're at a party and a child starts having a convulsions.
 - b. Someone comes up to you on the street and tells you that they think that they're demon-possessed.
 - c. Our church starts holding healing services on a Saturday evening where people are invited to come up the front, be prayed for and have demons exorcised.
 - d. A friend working as a missionary in the two-thirds world ask you to pray and for your advice because strange things are happening and they feel like they're under spiritual attack.