

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 12 January 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Peril of Prayerlessness

Matthew 17:14-23

Back in 2017, when the “e-vehicle” movement was beginning to pick up momentum, a man named **Trevor Milton** founded the **Nikola** company; and the very first e-vehicle that they promoted to the public was a huge lorry that they called “**the One.**” Now, in Nikola’s promotional video for this truck, they showed “the One” sailing smoothly down a desert highway, with dramatic-sounding music playing in the background; and it *looked* impressive. However, there was only one problem: **it didn’t run!** Other systems in the truck worked; but the most important operation of all (that of the truck’s propelling forward) didn’t work at all! How did they get it to run for the video, then? It’s simple: they took it to the top of a hill, pushed it over the peak of the hill, and then shot the video while it was rolling down a long slope, with camera tricks to give the impression of powered movement. In time, Nikola had to abandon their development of “the One”; but that didn’t shield them from the tough questions that came rolling in after their falsehood was exposed. At first, Nikola tried to deny that they had lied; but finally, they were forced to admit that “the One” never actually ran. (Although they did remind the public that they had *never actually claimed* that their “truck was driving under its own propulsion in the video”!)¹

It is entirely possible for a machine to *look* impressive, when, in fact, it doesn’t have any power. But guess what? The same is true in the spiritual realm. It is also possible for us, as Christians, to *look* impressive outwardly, when, in reality, we are not operating with any spiritual power at all. Now, the problem is *not* that the power is unavailable to us. *All* the power that we need to serve the Lord has been given to us, through the Holy Spirit. What’s the problem, then? The problem is that we often do not *avail* of the power, but instead try to labour in our *own* power—which will get us nowhere.

This morning, we will be reading about a time when Jesus’ disciples found themselves as powerless as that Nikola truck; and it caused them a great deal of embarrassment. (Worse than that, it gave Christ’s enemies occasion to blaspheme Him.) The title of this message is ***The Peril of Prayerlessness.***

Read Matthew 17:14-21.

I. The plea of a father (vv. 14-15)

In last week’s message, we examined the time when Jesus was up in a mountain (probably mount Hermon), along with Peter, James, and John. While they were up on the mountain, Christ showed these men an incredible vision of the future Kingdom Age. In a “waking vision” (a vision that was given to them while they were

wide awake), they saw their Master in His resurrected, glorified body. They also saw Moses and Elijah in *their* resurrected, glorified bodies; and all three of them were shining like the sun. They were also having a conversation about Christ's death on the cross for our sins, in Jerusalem.

The disciples were amazed and terrified at what they saw that day; but this experience was exactly what they needed. Peter, James, and John were all gifted with leadership; and Jesus allowed these three to be given this glimpse of His Kingdom glory, so that they might encourage the other disciples in the difficult days ahead. For one thing, they needed to be reminded that the Kingdom was still coming one day, even though it was now postponed, on account of Israel's unbelief. They also needed to be shown that, although great changes would soon be coming, the *Old Testament* Scriptures had not lost their validity, or importance. The fact that *Moses and Elijah* were having a conversation with Christ about His death on the cross forever imprinted on their minds the truth that *Jesus* as the fulfilment of the Law. This vision also confirmed that Christ's death on the cross was imminent—and absolutely necessary for mankind's salvation. It showed them that they needed to *hear* Christ's words...*always*. It also gave them a glimpse of the resurrection glory that is coming one day to *all* believers.

But now, the amazing mountaintop experience was over; and it was time to go back down the mountain. Peter, James, and John had been given a vision of “the sweet by and by”; but it was time to return to the “nasty now and now.” And “nasty” was exactly what they got! There, as the base of the mountain, were the other nine disciples, with a great crowd of people gathered around them; and, according to the Gospel of **Mark**, the scribes were gathered around them, as well, and were vehemently asking them all kinds of questions. (Though they were in Gentile territory, there was, apparently, a Jewish community in the area.) As Jesus, Peter, James, and John approached the multitude, they saw that there was a lot of commotion going on; and it was all centred on a man in the crowd who had brought his son to Jesus, with the hope that He would cast out a demon from him. Since Jesus still wasn't back from the mountain when he first arrived, he had brought his son to the disciples, in the hope that *they* would cast out the demon; yet, they weren't able to do it. They had cast out demons *before*; but now, they were strangely unable to do it. Like that big Nikola truck that had no power to move, the disciples were completely powerless to cast out the demon from this boy. Can you imagine the scornful comments that must have been coming from the mouths of the scribes? “So you men are representatives of the *Messiah*, are you? And He's supposed to be ushering in the *Kingdom*, is he? Where is all this great ‘power’ that we've heard about? If you can't cast out an unclean spirit from one boy, how will you cast out the Romans from Israel?”

But while the scribes were hurling their cynical remarks, and gloating over the suffering of this poor lad, the boy's father was in the depths of despair. We don't

know *how* this boy had become possessed; but somehow or other, he had given this wicked spirit permission to come into him. Perhaps, being in the pagan environment of Caesarea Philippi, he had played around with sorcery, and had thus opened himself up to evil spirits. Perhaps it was even more insidious than that. Perhaps this evil spirit had begun to manifest to him in his toddler years; and he, not realising that this “invisible friend” was actually a dastardly enemy, had embraced his “friendship,” and thus invited him to come into his body. However it happened, though, one thing is certain: there was no help to be found from the Jewish religious leaders. They had no spiritual power. Though they had the light of Scripture right under their noses, they were actually in spiritual darkness, because they were trying to get into the Kingdom by their *own* righteousness, instead of by repenting of their sins, and trusting in God’s promise of the coming Redeemer. Furthermore, now that their Redeemer was actually among them, they were *rejecting* Him; and because Israel was rejecting Christ, they were now even *more* vulnerable to the snares of the devil. With this in mind, let’s compare our **Matthew** passage to the **Mark** passage, and see what else we can learn about this boy, and his father.

Read Mark 9:14-29.

Can you hear the desperation of this father? Can you see his tears? Can you imagine how utterly helpless he must have felt when he realised that even the Apostles of Jesus of Nazareth (who, he had heard, was the Messiah) couldn’t cast out the demon from his son? Even as Jesus Himself was approaching the boy, the demon was *still* tormenting him. In fact, his condition seemed to get worse! In **Luke 9:42**, we are told that as Jesus was walking toward the boy, the demon threw him down on the ground, and **“tare him”**! This demon knew that he was in the presence of his Creator, who was about to send him packing; yet, he wanted to torment this boy as much as he could, for as long as he could.

Folks, demons are no joke! They are brazen and audacious enemies, who never sleep; and they are bent on destroying *you*! Before we move on to our next point, let’s see what Paul had to say about the snare of the devil.

Read 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

II. The perverseness of the people and powerlessness of the disciples (v. 16-17)

(Read Matthew 17:16-17 again.) This boy was certainly in “the snare of the devil.” Yet, he wasn’t the only one who was in the snare of the devil: *his dad* was in the snare of the devil, too. In fact, most of the people in the crowd that day were in the

snare of the devil. They may not have been foaming at the mouth, and acting like lunatics; but you don't *have* to be wallowing and foaming at the mouth to be in the "snare of the devil." All you have to do to be in the "snare of the devil" is to *not* believe on Christ! You may be of seemingly sound mind and body, yet be in the clutches of Satan (and not even know it). You see, this man had come to Jesus for help; but he didn't really believe on Him. He viewed Jesus as an exorcist, who *might* be able to help his son; but he didn't truly believe on Him as Saviour, and Messiah. That word "**if**" says it all. He said, "**if thou canst do an thing, have compassion on us, and help us.**" That word "**if**" reveals a heart of unbelief.

Now, how did Jesus respond to the man? Did he overlook his unbelief, and cast the demon out straightaway, so that the boy's suffering would end immediately? No. Jesus first confronted the father about his unbelief in Him. Using that same word "**if**" (which the dad himself had just used), Jesus replied, "**If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.**" Jesus knew that this man's family had a much deeper problem than demon-possession. Their problem was that they *weren't saved*, because they didn't believe on Him. Jesus knew that this *father* was in the "snare of the devil," just as his son was; and in order for him to miss hell, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven one day, he needed to *place His trust* in Him as Messiah and Saviour. What, then, was the result of this confrontation? The result was that the man was struck to the heart. For the first time, he saw his sin for what it was, and realised that his unbelief was separating him from God. A small spark of faith sprang up in his heart (apparently, enough to be saved); and he cried, "**Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.**"

Thank God, the man was saved that day; and we would hope that his son (after his sanity was restored) followed his dad's example, and placed his faith in Jesus, as well. Sadly, though, the multitudes that were gathered around Jesus that day remained, for the most part, in a state of unbelief. That is why Jesus responded, "**O faithless and perverse generation!**" Let's look at that Scripture again. (**Read Matthew 17:17 again.**)

One day, when Christ returns to earth, there *will* be a generation of Jewish people who will finally turn to Jesus, and believe on Him. However, as Jesus faced the multitudes that day, He saw a company of stone-cold, hard-hearted people. He was looking at a generation that *refused* to believe on Him. They were a "**faithless and perverse generation.**" The word "**faithless**" means "unbelieving"; and the word "**perverse**" (or "perverted") means "corrupted, distorted," or "turning aside." This doesn't mean that they were all committing the deepest, darkest, most heinous sins possible; but it does mean that they were sinners, corrupted in heart and mind by their sin, and turning away from God. My friends, this is the very nature of *all* sin: sin causes us to turn away from God! **Isaiah 53:6** says, "**All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.**" Jesus came to seek and save

us, because we are *all* like foolish sheep, wandering away from Him, and straight into the path of mortal danger; yet, most people refuse to receive His saving hand. That is why Jesus, in grief and exasperation, exclaimed, ***“How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?”***

Yet, Jesus’ exasperation wasn’t merely with the multitudes, who refused to believe on Him as Messiah; He was also exasperated with His disciples. After all, it was just *after* the father told Jesus that the disciples couldn’t cast out the demon that Jesus had said, ***“O faithless and perverse generation!”*** Jesus was grieved over them, too. You see, the unbelief of the multitudes had affected the disciples, as well. Jesus’ popularity had waned a lot lately; and Jesus Himself was no longer talking about the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand. Therefore, they were losing heart, and courage. Not so long before, they *had* successfully cast out demons from people; but now, their faith had weakened: and because their faith was very small, they had no power. They were like that Nikola truck, sitting on the tarmac, and going nowhere. Thankfully, though, help was on the way. The most important need of all—the salvation of this boy’s dad—had been met; and now, Jesus was about to show mercy to the boy.

III. The precious words of the Saviour (v. 18)

(Read Matthew 17:18 again.) With a simple word of command, Jesus forced the demon to leave the boy. In hatred and spite, the spirit tore him one last time, with his cruel talons: but he left. The spirit *couldn’t* stay, because his Creator had commanded him to leave. He was in the presence of the great Judge, before whom he will one day bow, and call Him “Lord”!

Read Philippians 2:5-11.

My friends, one day, *every* created being, both of men and angels, *will* bow to Jesus Christ. Satan himself, the most evil, malevolent being in heaven or earth, will have no choice but to bow to the Lord Jesus Christ; and he and all his minions are well-aware of this truth. *They* believe that Jesus is God, and Lord, and Judge of all; but their belief in this fact won’t spare them from His judgment. That is why the Apostle James said, ***“Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”*** It’s not enough merely to have an intellectual “head belief” that Jesus is God, and Messiah, and Judge: you must *turn your life over to Him*. You must come to Christ on His terms of repentance and faith in Him, and receive His free gift of salvation. You do not have the option of sitting on the fence: you must choose *Him*. Jesus offered Himself to the people of Israel; but most of them remained complacent and indifferent, and refused to come to Him in true faith,

and commit their souls to Him. My friend, if you have not been saved, please don't follow their example! Satan and his minions have *no* chance of redemption; but *you do*. Christ came down to this earth, and took on human flesh, not merely that He might cast devils out of hapless people, but that He might snatch them from sin and death, and give them eternal life. However, salvation is a limited time offer. ***"Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*** If you do not know the Lord, *now* is the time to receive Him!

Now, let's return to our passage of Scripture. We've seen that the man was saved from his sin and unbelief, and the boy was snatched from the clutch of demons. However, there were eleven believers standing there, whose faith in Christ needed to be *strengthened*; and their names were Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Canaanite, and Bartholomew. Let's see what Jesus said to them.

IV. The power of faith and prayer (vv. 19-21)

(Read Matthew 17:19-21.) At this point, the disciples were feeling utterly humiliated. Like puppies with their tails between their legs, they sneaked up to Jesus later, and asked Him why *they* were not able to cast out the demon. Jesus' answer was simple: ***"Because of your unbelief."*** Now, remember: eleven of these men were true believers. They *had* trusted Christ for salvation. However, their faith in their *daily walk*, and in their *service* to Christ, was small. As they looked at the frowning faces of the hard-hearted multitudes, they noticed that the tide was turning against Jesus; and their hearts were filled with fear and uncertainty. Thus, when they were confronted with a cruel enemy (this evil spirit), their hearts failed them. The power of the Holy Spirit, which they had had before, was not there, because **their faith** was small.

In a moment, we will talk more about **faith**. First, though, there is a big, obvious question that needs to be addressed: What, exactly, did Jesus mean when He promised that *even mountains* could be cast into the sea through faith? Was He speaking literally, or figuratively?

Well, first of all, we need to realise to *whom* this promise was given. This promise was given to *the twelve Apostles*; and Jesus had given them special power to do *miracles*. Jesus had sent the Apostles out two by two, and had specifically commissioned them to ***"heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils."*** Of course, in *this* instance, they had failed to cast out a demon, because of their lack of faith; but Jesus made it clear that they *should* have been able to cast out this demon, because He had given them the authority to do special signs and wonders. We, on the other hand, do not have the gift of miracles today, as

the Apostles and other early Christians had. Of course, God still does miracles when He chooses; but He no longer gives us the *apostolic gift* of performing miracles. The whole point of God's giving *these* men the ability to do miracles was to put His visible stamp of authority on them, and upon the Gospel message that they were preaching. These were the men whom Christ had chosen to lay the foundation of His institution, the local church; and the powerful miracles that they did demonstrated to the world that they were from God, and that the message they preached was from God.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:11-12.

Now, there is something else we need to realise about Jesus' promise here in **Matthew 17:20**. What we need to realise is that the Apostles were *not* able to do miracles whenever, and upon whomever, they wished, or for whatever reason they wished. Miracles were done only according to *God's* will, when God *led* them to perform it. Jesus Himself healed people according to the *Father's* will and timing. Jesus didn't do miracles simply for the sake of putting on a show, either. Jesus refused to do miracles when King Herod demanded that He do a miracle, because He knew that Herod only wanted entertainment. What did this mean for the Apostles, then? It means that the Apostles *could* have literally moved a mountain out of its place...*if* the Lord had revealed to them that it was *His* will to do so. However, the Lord never willed for a mountain to be moved into the sea within their lifetimes; thus, it never happened.

Now, maybe you're thinking, "O.K., Pastor, this is interesting; but you still haven't answered the question. Was the promise of "moving mountains literal, or figurative?" Well, the answer is: "Both!" On the one hand, there *is* a figurative meaning here. For example, when God commissioned Zerubbabel to re-build the Temple, He said, "**Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.**" In other words, the "mountain" of fierce opposition from the enemies of Israel would not prevent Zerubbabel from rebuilding the Temple. God would protect him, and give him the power to do the impossible. The same is true for us today. When God commissions you to do something for Him, He has *all* the power to make it happen. You simply need to *trust Him* to do that thing through you.

Now, that having been said, I do not believe that Jesus was *merely* speaking figuratively. There is a *literal* promise here, too! There is coming a time when mountains will *literally* be "cast into the sea." In **Revelation 6:14**, we are told that during the Tribulation period, there will be a worldwide earthquake that will cause "**every mountain and island**" to be "**moved out of their places.**" And from whence will all this judgment come? Obviously, it will come from God; but as far as people on earth are concerned, this miraculous judgment will be the work of "**the two witnesses**" that the Bible tells us about in **Revelation 11**. God's "two

witnesses" in Jerusalem will literally *invoke* many of the plagues, by speaking the word! **Revelation 11:6** says that these two men will have power to "***shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power to turn waters to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.***" Apparently, these men will also be the ones who will cause literal mountains to be "cast into the sea"! We know that this will happen, because it is prophesied in **Psalm 46**.

Read Psalm 46:1-11.

In this psalm, the LORD is instructing Jewish believers who will be living during the Tribulation to *trust in Him*, even in the midst of the horrible judgments that will be going on all around them. Please notice, though, what kind of judgment will take place. In **verse 2**, David writes, "***Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.***" David is *not* speaking figuratively here! During the Tribulation, mountains will literally be "***carried***" into the sea, resulting in enormous tsunamis, and global mega-quakes. Jesus said that during the Tribulation there will be "***upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring***"; and many of these judgments will be on account of two men *who prayed in faith!*

Now, since this "mountain removed into the sea" promise won't literally be fulfilled until the Tribulation period, perhaps you are wondering how this verse applies to *you*. The application is this: Whatever things that *God* wills to do through you, He will *give you the faith* that you need to pray for it—and then the power to do it. God will grant the things that you need to serve Him, if you will only ask for it *in faith*. No obstacle is too great for Him!

Read 2 Corinthians 5:6-7 / 12:7-9.

Brethren, we must walk by *faith*, and not by sight; and as we walk in faith, we must cast down all pride and self-sufficiency, and *pray*. You cannot separate faith from prayer! If you really believe that God will supply all your need, you will ask Him for it. There may be things that God wants *you* to pray for today. Perhaps there are spiritual needs in *your* life—sinful habits that need to be conquered, wisdom that is needed to make crucial decisions, or souls of loved ones or friends that need to be saved. Will you trust God enough to ask Him for these things? **Perhaps you need to start fasting as you pray.** Jesus told the disciples that there are some demons that are so powerful, that they can be cast out only by prayer and fasting. Let's look at that verse again. **(Read Matthew 17:21.)**

Brethren, we do not have the kind of apostolic authority that the Apostles had to *command* demons to leave people; but we *do* have the authority to *pray* over people who are possessed. I can say, from experience, that when I first attempted to cast demons out of someone, the demons only laughed at my rebuke—until I realised my mistake, and began to pray directly to God, and asked *Him* to rebuke the demons. The demons screamed and made the most hideous sounds imaginable; but after a couple minutes, they left! I can honestly say, though, that I don't believe those demons would have left if I had not been in the habit of **fasting**, as well. What *is* fasting? Well, let's put it this way. This past week, I was talking with Pastor McKinley; and he told me that when he is super-focused on getting some project done, he doesn't even notice that he hasn't eaten: he goes for hours on end, with hardly any notice that his stomach is growling. *That* is what real fasting it like! Fasting isn't some means of afflicting yourself, so that you can earn favour with God, by doing a "hard thing": rather, it is a season when you are so focused on getting hold of the "horns of the altar," and wrestling in prayer, and pleading with God for His power and blessing, that you're not even thinking about food for the time being. In fact, the thought of indulging your fleshly appetite is abominable to you. Even though your stomach is rumbling, you *know* that now is not a time to stuff your face, or to go about your day as if it were any other day. You know that now is the time to *plead with God*! The Son of God Himself, when He wasn't feasting with lost sinners, had seasons of *fasting*; and if even *He* needed to fast and pray, we need to fast and pray, too!

Conclusion: Brethren, we have much to pray about! Christians are wavering, and stumbling into sin, every day. Families (even Christian families) are crumbling every day. Many churches are weak and ineffective, because of sin and spiritual apathy in the body. Lost people all around us are dying and slipping into an eternity of separation from God; and they need far more than deliverance from demonic possession: they need salvation from *sin*. We need to *pray* for them! **Our homes** should be houses of prayer all day long; and **this church body** should be a house of prayer, no matter in what facility we happen to meet. Our prayer meetings should be full. You may *think* that if you miss a prayer meeting, it won't make much difference. (After all, you're just one person.) But what would happen if you were trying to type a letter, yet one of the 26 letters on your keyboard were missing? What if two keys were missing? Or five, or ten, or 15? You might be able to type *something*; but the message would be very incomplete, and ineffective. Well, it's the same way with prayer. The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much; but how much more would the effectual, fervent prayer of *every member of this body* avail? Brethren, as we enter this new year, *let us, as a church, pray* as we have never prayed before! **Perhaps you have never repented of your sin, and truly believed on Christ, and received Him into your life.** If so, I am here to warn you that you are in the snare of the devil! He has you where he wants you—bound in sin, and with your eyes blinded to the Gospel. Please don't remain in that condition! The Light of God's Word is shining today; and it is time to respond. Please come forward in this invitation, and place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

¹ Sean Szymkowsky, "Nikola says electric-hydrogen truck never ran, as company publishes counterpoints," CNET, 14 September 2020, <https://www.cnet.com/roadshow/news/nikola-electric-hydrogen-truck-ran-trevor-milton/>