

Matthew (Part Twenty-Three)

Matthew 17-18 Relationships with God and Man

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Let us go to Matthew chapter 17. We are going to pick it up in verse 14. We left off in verse 13.

Matthew 17:14-20 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, for he often falls into the fire and into the water. 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. And then came the disciples to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" And 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."

First of all, in verse 15, I think there is something that is kind of interesting there. It says, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic" (KJV). It is the word lunatic that is kind of interesting because the Greek literally says that this person was moonstruck.

Now the thing that I think that is remarkable about it as something worth considering, is that it gives you an indication of how accurate or how accurately the apostles recorded what was said. They surely could have glossed over that, but they did not gloss over what the person said. Now we know, of course, that the moon has at the very least a minimal effect upon people. There might be some effect, but I am sure that it is very minimal and

not enough to make a person into an epileptic, because that is what he was talking about here, somebody who was having epileptic seizures at least of that kind.

And yet the apostles faithfully recorded exactly what the man thought and exactly what he said. He thought that this person had been affected by the moon. No, he was not. He was demon possessed. It was not the moon that was doing anything. The person was demon possessed.

The next thing that I think is interesting is the action of the father. Now the father persisted. Apparently, just from what I see here, the man—I would have to deduce that the man was somewhat familiar with Christ and the apostles and that he recognized or had seen at some time or another that the apostles had done some miraculous things. And yet on this occasion, the apostles could not be used to heal this boy, and yet the man was not put off. He went right to the Boss.

I want you to notice a couple of things. First of all, the apostles had been given the gift to heal and to cast out demons. You can read this in Matthew 10, beginning in verse 1. Yet on this occasion they could not. Now Jesus tells the reason why. First of all, they did not have enough faith. We will stop right there.

Apparently, at least the way it is written here, they had not had any failures up until this point. Now maybe they did and maybe they did not, but this is the first recorded failure of the apostles to cast out a demon or to heal someone. Because remember, back there in Matthew 10-12, and along with Luke, that they came back rejoicing. They said that even the demons, the spirits are subject unto them.

That shows me something that I think that you are aware of. And that is that faith is not a constant factor. Faith fluctuates. There are times when we have more faith. There are times when we have less faith. There are areas in which our faith is stronger than it is in others, that our beliefs are not consistent. And of course neither were the apostles'. Their beliefs fluctuated. Their attitudes fluctuated. And so faith we can see is not a constant factor. It

has to be nurtured. It has to be fed. If it is not fed, it will deteriorate. Now that is true. If it is not fed, it will deteriorate. If it is not used, it will deteriorate.

The next thing that I want you to notice is this: that the failure of a representative of God did not change God or His truth. Now God came along in the person of Jesus Christ. He immediately healed the person. And so God was still willing to heal. But He did not heal because of the faithlessness of the apostles. So we see here that God does not change, people do. Man proposes, but God disposes.

Now there is another side of this that I know that you are familiar with: that because God disposes, because God is in control, that He rules His creation. That even though a person, a representative of His, may have strong faith, and the faith of the person who is being anointed is strong, does not necessarily mean that God is going to heal that person right then or even in the immediate future. That is very well seen in the epistles. Because I think that there is no doubt at all that the faith of the apostles grew from Acts 2 till the end of their lives, and that they were stronger in faith at the end of their lives than they were at the beginning of their spiritual lives. And yet we find that healings drop off rather than increase. Now that can be only attributed to the action of God, that He decided not to do it.

For whatever His reasons were, He did not heal as often after the church got started as He did before. But that did not change God. That still did not change His promise.

Now notice back here in Romans 3. Paul got involved in a situation where he was accused of something of which he was not guilty, but nonetheless he answered the accusers. And he uses a very interesting argument beginning in verse 3.

Romans 3:3-4 For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written, "That You might be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged."

That is a quote from Psalm 51:4.

What Paul is saying here is this: regardless of the way a man is, that does not change God. *God is always true*. Now because the apostles failed to heal this boy, cast the demon out, did that change the fact that God promised to heal? No, it did not. Did it change the Sabbath? No. Did it change the holy days? No. Did it change any of the commandments of God? No. Did it change the fact that Christ is going to return? No. It did not change anything that had to do with God.

Now, that is a very important point and it is one that we always need to have somewhere in our thinking—that what a man does does not change what God is. And you know, you are going to be more tempted. There is going to be stronger and stronger deception coming from Satan. He is going to use all of his power to try to pervert and twist. He is going to above all try to make the leadership of this church, like he did here with Paul accusing him of being a liar, look bad. But what Paul is saying is, regardless of what is said or done by a man, that does not change God one bit. That does not change the Sabbath. That does not change the holy days. That does not change the commandments. And so it should not destroy your faith.

Back to Matthew 17. You see, that is what is involved here; that the apostles' failure did not change God's promise to heal.

Now the next thing I want you to notice is Jesus' reaction to the father. Consider this: that Jesus had just come down from the Transfiguration and if there was ever a time in a person's life when he would have the opportunity or maybe the excuse or the justification to feel exalted—because had He not just been glorified? You bet. I do not know if any other living man has ever gone through that experience, not even Moses.

When Moses was in the presence of God, he came down off the mountain, and his face shone. He was actually *reflecting* the glory of God. But in this case, Jesus was actually glorified before them.

Now if there was ever anything that would make a person feel exalted about himself, that would be it. But you see, Jesus turned and very patiently took care of the situation. There is a very good lesson in that for us.

Modern Protestantism, by and large, teaches a religion that is nothing more than escapism. The idea is to get good feelings. The idea is to give your heart to the Lord, to "feel good" about being close to God. Well, Jesus shows us the true purpose of being close to God. The true purpose of being close to God is to draw strength from Him so that you can do good to others. Now what did James say that pure religion and undefiled is? See, to visit the widows in their affliction. And so the purpose of our closeness to God is not to get something for ourselves, but rather to be a conductor or a means through which God can work so that we can care for and do good toward others.

The next thing. They, of course, wanted to know why they could not cast out this demon. And Jesus said, "It's because of your unbelief." They simply were not close enough to God. In between the time that they had been given the gift to be able to do this, they had let their spirituality deteriorate. And so they were not being used as they could have.

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Now, I do not believe that Jesus intended us to take that literally. Because we are to use the powers that we receive of God not for foolish things like throwing mountains in the ocean. But rather, what we are looking at there is a Jewish idiom. It is an expression that implies or means something other than the literal words. And what it means is that if you had faith, you can solve great difficulties. You see, a mountain represents a huge problem.

Jesus is telling us how to solve the great difficulties in our life. It is to believe God. That is how you get rid of problems. That is how you get rid of marital problems. That is how you get rid of child-rearing problems. That is how you get rid of health problems. That is how you get rid of stress problems, anxiety problems, depression problems. That is how you get rid of war and economic problems. You have faith in God. All of those can be mountainous problems.

Now why did Israel go to war? Because they did not believe God. And so their mountainous problems with their neighbors were never resolved. If they had believed God, they would have never had to go to war. Now, which was

the easier way? Which was the simpler way? You see what He is saying here. "Look, there are simple answers to complex problems. And that simple answer is to believe God." That is almost too simplistic. But that is the way it is.

Matthew 17:21 "However, this kind [meaning the demon] does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

That is interesting too, because it shows that demons have different personalities. They no doubt have different authorities. Some demons are more obstinate. Some are extremely cruel, bloodthirsty, vicious. Some of them apparently are jokers. You know, those are the kind that rattle the chains and knock on your walls and do things that scare you half out of your life.

But you see, this was a demon that was very obstinate, stubborn, hard to deal with. And so it would not come out. It would not listen to them. It resisted the authority of God in those men. But it did not resist the authority of God in Jesus Christ. And so the way to get the power is to fast and pray—keep close to God so that God's Spirit can flow through us.

Matthew 17:22-23 Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up." And they were exceedingly sorrowful.

It almost seems as though those verses are just interjected there to show a chronology and to keep things moving.

Matthew 17:24-27 When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does not your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" And he said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" And Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we should offend them, go to the sea,

cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that, and give it to them for Me and you."

Another very interesting example here. First of all, what He was talking about here or the subject is the Temple tax. Now the Temple tax is a biblical command. It is given back in Exodus 30:13. And it was a fee that was levied on every male above 20 years of age.

Now the Temple tax consisted of two days' pay for a working man. It was equivalent to that. It was not a very large sum of money. In fact, an extremely small sum of money compared to the kind of taxes that we have to pay here in the United States. I do not believe that this was the only tax that they had to pay, but it was a tax that went specifically for the operations of the Temple. And so this tax then maintained the Temple in its fine condition. It also paid for the animals that had to be bought for sacrifice: the bulls, the goats, the sheep, the turtledoves that were used in the national sacrifices.

It had to pay for the wood that had to be cut down, sawn into pieces, carried into the Temple. It paid for the help, you know, all the servants and so forth that maintained the place and kept things in good order. It paid for the vestments that the priests wore. I have read in one account that the vestment that the high priest wore was worth a king's ransom. I do not know how much money that was, but that is a considerable amount of money. It also had to pay for the incense, the oil, whatever was used in the Temple.

It was collected at the same time every year, so we can date this. It was collected between the 15th and the 20th of Adar. Adar corresponded to our February-March period. So, it was collected whenever the priests went out into all of the local towns and villages, and on the 15th they would set up a booth in the gate of the city, in a public square wherever they could be easily gotten to. And then they would have all of the census rolls with them. And as the people came bringing their money, they would check it off that they had paid and then give the person a receipt that they had paid it. It was obligatory upon all the males.

If a person for whatever reasons did not have the money to pay by the 25th of Adar, they closed their booths then, and then the money could be collected

only in Jerusalem at other times during the year. This, incidentally, was one of the excuses for having the money changers. See, because these people were coming in from all of the provinces and sometimes they brought foreign currency with them because there was, you know, Roman culture and Greek culture, and they wanted to pay their Temple tax and so they would bring it right to the Temple and then the money exchange was made. Now why they could not set it up somewhere else, I do not know, but that was one of their excuses for setting up the money-changing tables right in the Temple.

Now, Jesus did pay this tax. But I think that His reasoning is very interesting. He said that the reason He paid it was so that He would not offend other people. But let us look and see what led up to it. He says, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?"

We have two courses of thought here. Both of them are similar. If there was anybody in a king's realm who was going to escape paying taxes, it would be his own children. But others outside of the family would pay taxes. Now the second course of thinking is this: that the children represent the people of his own country. The strangers are the countries that he has under tribute, that is, that he with his armies has conquered. You will read in the Bible several different times where countries were either paying tribute to Israel or Israel was paying tribute to them. And in this case, the conqueror was being paid by the conquered.

Now, the reason they did that was, of course, to make sure that they could maintain order in the conquered country and also, if it is possible, that they could tax the conquered country enough so that their own taxes would either be completely alleviated or would be very small by comparison. In other words, you make the conquered people not only maintain their own country, but you make them pay for the maintenance of your own country as well. Now that was Jesus' question: who does a king take taxes from?" Well, the answer is obvious. He does not take it from his own family. He takes it from outsiders.

You see, the question is this: who owned the Temple? Well, God did. Now who were God's children? Well, at that time, Jesus was the only one. He was the only begotten Son of the Father. Now, should Jesus have to pay the

Temple tax? Well, the answer was obvious. Legally, no, He did not have to pay it because the King was His Father, and the King does not take taxes from His own children. But you see, He went above and beyond duty. He did it so that He would not offend others.

Now what about us? What about the Jews? A little later on, Vespasian collected the Temple tax. And instead of using it on the Temple, He took it to Rome and he used it in Jupiter Capitolinus' temples. Now what do you do in a case like that if you are a citizen of Judea? Do you rebel? You see, this begins to get into the area, let us say, of national taxes. What if we disagree with the way the money is used?

You say, well, maybe that does not apply to us. Oh yes, it does. Using the same reasoning that Jesus used, we are no longer citizens of the United States. Our King is God. And the tax we pay to Him is the tithe. Now what about the taxes to the United States of America? Or to Britain or to Germany or to Switzerland or to any other place where God has people? Our King is the King of all the earth. Should we pay taxes? Well, you see, that is what Jesus was saying here: that even though we may disagree with them, disagree with the way they are used, in order not to offend, you better pay them.

Do you know what would happen if we did not pay our taxes? We would all be thrown in jail. How would we do the work in jail? We would be finished. We really would. That would stop the work dead in its tracks. So you see, there is a very practical streak to the reasoning here. And so in order not to get them upset, you go ahead and pay the tax.

In verse 27 there something interesting here, at least a different insight. If you read the commentaries, most of them tend to believe that what we have here is a garbling of the English language in the translation from the Greek to the English. Now they claim, and I will give you this for what it is worth, that what Jesus did here was use another Hebrew idiom. And that rather than His intention being that Peter was supposed to go out and catch a fish and find money in the fish's mouth, that Jesus' real intention was really very practical, and that is He was simply telling Peter, "Look, go out and earn the money by fishing. Go back to work, and with the fish that you catch, we will pay the tax."

Now there is some good reasoning behind believing that. First of all, apparently the Greek will support that interpretation because of the Hebrew idiom that was used there. Secondly, there is never any account of Jesus using His miraculous power for His own benefit under any situation, under any circumstance. Now in this case, He would have been using His miraculous power to pay His taxes. However insignificant they might seem to you and me, He did not use His gifts for Himself.

Remember in the temptation in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, that was the way that Satan tried to get to Him to use His power for His own good. Now this is nothing more than another form of that principle. That if by a miracle the money appeared in a fish's mouth, then He would be using His power to get His own taxes. Now, not only that, the entire thrust of the Bible is to be prospered by work. And you see, that goes against that. If God gives a gift, fine. But He usually gives the gifts to those who are working.

And again, another one: that God does not need to do miracles for us in areas that we can good and well do for ourselves. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And if we can earn the money to pay the taxes, that is what He is going to require of us, except in unusual circumstances where we are working hard, but there is no chance that we are ever going to come up with whatever it is that we need. So I think that there is a pretty good indication there that these people might be right. That the Hebraism there simply means, "Peter, get in your boat, cast out your net and earn some money. And from that money that you earn, we will pay the taxes."

On to chapter 18. I think that chapter 18 is one of the great chapters in the Bible. And it is, as is Matthew's mind, I guess we might put it, very well organized, tightly structured. It is very neatly divided into seven subjects. And all these seven subjects or topics fit under one subject. And the subject I have chosen to entitle "The Essence of Personal Relations," the spirit, the essence of how to get along with other people.

Now these seven areas are:

1. A person's attitude. First of all, your own attitude. And of course, He instructs us that we have to have an attitude of humility, childlike.

2. Responsibility or duty in a specific area. We will see what that specific area is when we get to it.
3. Self-renunciation or self-sacrifice.
4. Personal attention or individual care.
5. How do you correct a person who is wrong? That is certainly part of human relations.
6. Fellowship.
7. Forgiveness. And it is interesting, the section on forgiveness takes up almost half of the chapter. There are only 35 verses in it, but it takes up at least a third of it, 12 or 13 of the verses all by itself.

Matthew 18:1-4 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child, is greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

They ask a question. Jesus at first did not directly answer their question. I think that what He said though is extremely significant. Their question was, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' answer was, "Unless you become like a child, you will not even be there." He says, "Let's put first things first. Let's get there first. Unless you become like a child, you will not even be there." And then He goes on to say that if you are like a child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Now you see, that shows me that everybody in the Kingdom of heaven is going to have at least one thing in common. They are going to have childlike attitudes. I think the thing that we need to do here to kind of understand what Jesus is driving at might be to ask ourselves a question, remembering Jesus' reply. What is it that we are aiming for in life? Are we aiming for the

Kingdom of God? Or are we kidding ourselves and still aiming for something else?

Now, if we are aiming for something else, it is going to be very difficult to have a childlike attitude. That is what He is saying. If you are aiming for money, prestige, power, authority, position, things along that line, what is it going to develop in you? Keep your mind on your goal. What is the keeping of your mind on that goal going to do to you? See, it is going to do something to your attitude. What is that? You will be materialistic. But if you are reaching out for materialism, what are you going to be? Self-willed, carnal, competitive. That is the word I am looking for, competitive. You are going to be highly competitive.

Satan has convinced man that competition is the way. And if you are competitive, you are always trying to get ahead of the other guy. You are always trying to beat them up to get the best of the deal. That is not a childlike attitude. You see, you are trying to conquer others. Now that is why I asked the question, what are we aiming for? Because what we aim for in life is going to pretty much determine the way we are attitude-wise. And if our drive is materialistic, we are going to be competitive.

Kevin Dean, who is over the YOU, was giving several illustrations that I thought were really interesting about how psychologists have experimented with children (who do not even know that they are being experimented with). But they experiment with these children to see which system produces the most. And so they will arrange a circumstance where the children are competing against one another. And then they will arrange another circumstance with the same children where the children, by the rules that are established, have to cooperate with one another. And it always works out the same way. They always produce more *cooperating* than competing with one another. Because the whole group gets involved, and when you have a multitude of hands and minds that are all working in the same direction rather than against one another, you always produce more.

But if everybody is working at counter purposes and trying to beat the other fellow out, it is every man for himself, and maybe one person will achieve a great deal but others do not. They have found in these experiments that oftentimes a child will know instinctively that he cannot compete and he will

just quit even before you get started. Now what is he contributing? Absolutely nothing. See, he is not helping produce. The competition, you see, the attitude has just driven him off to the sidelines.

That is what Jesus is driving at here. What is going to produce the most? It is when people have their mind on the Kingdom of God, see, not on getting things for themselves. And what it is going to produce is a right attitude. It is going to be like a child. Now we are talking here about a little child who has not been hardened by the world yet. He has definitely not gone to school.

Now, I have listed three things very quickly here. There might be many other things that could be given in terms of a child's attitude, things that I think that we need to aim for.

Number one is *humility*. Now humility is a proper evaluation of oneself in relation to God and man. A person can be humble and still be very talented and use that talent for the good of others. A humble person does not hide his talent.

In fact, we are going to see as we go along here that if a person hides his talent, God does not want that person in His Kingdom. That person is useless. If you have talent, you better be using it. Does that not show that in the Parable of the Talents? Luke 19, Matthew 25? What happened to the person who hid his talent? God said, "Get out of here!" So if a person hides his talent because of a false humility, that is not helping things at all. Talents are given to be used. So a humble person can be a very talented person, but he has a very good understanding of himself in relation to both God and man.

The second thing that a child has is that he is *dependent* on his parents and he knows it. He looks to his parents for everything. A parent is to a child as God is to a faithful man and we need to emulate that. From Adam on, man has been striving to be independent of God. He seems to consider it a weakness to be dependent on God. And that is why the Bible says that the carnal mind is enmity against God. It is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be, because man drives himself from his dependence.

The third thing is that a child *trusts* his parents. He is not only dependent, but he implicitly trusts the decisions of his parents. Now we of course have to

come to trust God. You know, men are fearful of trusting God as though He will not back up His promises. Well, that is not being childlike. A child trusts his parents.