

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 17 (PART 2)

Matthew 17:10-13 - John The Baptist Is In The Ministry Of Elijah

This topic was previously discussed in Matthew 11:1-15. The transfiguration vision on the mountain included Moses and Elijah. It's possible that the presence of Elijah prompted the disciples to think, discuss and question the Old Testament prophecy that Elijah will come before the kingdom of God comes.

Jesus helps the disciples see that John the Baptist, though not literally Elijah, was serving as an Elijah figure, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. Here's what we discussed when we looked at Matthew 11:

John was serving a specific prophetic purpose prophesied in Malachi 3 & 4, the final chapters of the Old Testament:

Malachi 3:1 - Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 4:5-6 - "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse."

John's ministry purpose was to "prepare" the people for the coming of the Messiah, primarily through the announcement of repentance. He is serving in a role prophesied by Malachi that an "Elijah" like figure would come. While some Jews believed that Elijah would literally come before the coming of the Messiah, Jesus affirms the view that John's role was *like* Elijah's.

Jesus adds to the conversation that like John the Baptist was not accepted as being sent by God, so too the Son of Man is going to suffer. This is the next instance of Jesus telling/preparing his disciples for his coming suffering.

Matthew 17:14-21 - Jesus Heals Tormented Man

Before we discuss this section of verses, I want to address a manuscript issue in verse 21.

v. 21 - this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting - this verse, while present in some manuscripts, is absent in the oldest and most reliable ones. As a result, the NASB puts the verse in [brackets] or *italics* while other translations, like the ESV, NIV and CSB omit the verse and include a translator's note.

While likely not original to Matthew's gospel, Mark 9:29 includes a similar verse in Mark's account of this incident. In my opinion, honest and direct information from translators and publishers add to the Bible's reliability and credibility rather than fostering doubt/skepticism.

v. 15 - "lunatic", Greek: σεληνιαζομαι, seleniazomai - NET Bible Note - Literally "*he is moonstruck*," possibly meaning "lunatic" (so NAB, NASB), although now the term is generally regarded as referring to some sort of seizure disorder such as epilepsy.

ESV, NIV, NET, NLT, CSB - "He has seizures"

Q - Why do you think Jesus responds the way he does in this situation?

To be honest, this is sort of a strange record. The disciples can't help the boy, Jesus can/does and comments that their inability to bring deliverance was because of the disciples' lack of faith. A couple things we see.

- 1 - The boy is dealing with physical effects caused by demonic influence
- 2 - When the demon is rebuked/confronted by Jesus, the demon leaves and the boy is instantly cured.
- 3 - Not all illnesses/conditions are caused by demons. However, there are some instances where there are physical effects of spiritual oppression.
- 4 - Apparently, especially when we take into account what Mark 9:29 says, there are some demonic forces that are resisted not by dramatic confrontations but by prayer (and perhaps fasting).

Mark 9:28-29 - When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" 29 And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

It is not as if the disciples have no faith, it is more that their faith is not working correctly. A mustard seed is small, but it still has life in it. Perhaps the disciples were over confident in themselves and their past successes that they hadn't included something as simple as prayer in their approach when dealing with this boy's illness. Can you imagine approaching a difficult situation and doing all sorts of good and right things but neglecting prayer? I do that all the time!

v. 20 - moving mountains - ESV Study Bible - "Moving a **mountain** was a common metaphor in Jewish literature for doing what was seemingly **impossible** (cf. Isa. 40:4; 49:11; 54:10; Matt. 21:21-22)."

What will we do with this incredible verse? Will we think of all the blessings we can accumulate now that "nothing will be impossible"? Will we dream of a problem-free life now that we can "move mountains"? If that's where our head goes when we read such a verse, maybe we're heading down the same path the ineffective disciples were.

Instead, we ought to be in awe of God’s great power! A small speck of faith in Him activates incredible power!? Who is like this God who works wonders and changes lives?! It’s not the fastest, strongest, richest, smartest or most accomplished person that gets heaven’s attention, but the one with even the smallest amount of faith?! Wow.

Matthew 17:22-23 - Second Time Telling Of His Death

Again Jesus tempers any wild Messianic expectations by reminding his disciples that his path to glory must first be through suffering. His disciples are understandably grieved.

I wonder if the reason why he just told them of the power of mustard seed faith was to contrast the reality of the coming days of trial. Jesus’ own faith (surely larger/stronger than a mustard seed) didn’t lead to the avoidance of trials/suffering but it sustained him in hope. And ultimately the mountains he faced were removed, as will ours too in the age to come.

Matthew 17:24-27 - Jesus And Taxes

This chapter ends with what at first appears to be a random disconnected story about taxes, identity and fishing. Jesus is asked about his view on paying the taxes of Rome since he is the Messiah and his reign is expected soon. (Makes sense that if you think it’s the end of the world or at least the end of the current administration’s rule you might not send an income tax prepayment for the next quarter). But yet Jesus pays the tax as a demonstration of how the “sons of the kingdom” will interact as they wait for their king to reign.

The New Testament makes clear elsewhere that Christians ought to honor their governmental rulers and pay taxes and Jesus is modeling that here. In his case he gets the cash from the mouth of a fish Peter will hook later that afternoon!

But I think something bigger is happening with Matthew’s inclusion of this story.

Let’s think back about the paradox we have read in the last chapter or so. This paradox is contrasting the power and humility of Jesus Christ.

15:29-31	Jesus Delivers Many In Galilee
15:32-16:12	Second Feeding Of Thousands (this time mostly Gentiles)
16:13-20	Jesus’ clearest declaration of being the Messiah (as Peter affirms this truth)
16:21-27	Jesus’ first telling of his suffering, death and resurrection
16:28-17:8	Jesus’ transfiguration, a vision of the coming of the son of man
17:9-13	Jesus tells his disciples that he’s going to be rejected & suffer like John
17:14-21	Jesus heals boy afflicted by demon with a rebuke
17:22-23	Jesus again tells disciples he’s going to suffer, die & be raised (they’re grieved)
17:24-27	Jesus uses a conversation about paying taxes to get a fish serve as a piggy bank

Do you see the paradox of the last few chapters?

Jesus is powerful. Jesus is going to be rejected.
Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is going to suffer.
Jesus is greater than Moses and Elijah. Jesus is going to die.
Jesus is going to be rejected. Jesus has power over demons.
Jesus is going to suffer. But first go find exact change in a big mouth bass.

This is the story of Christianity in this age. We have power but we are persecuted. We have trouble but we see God do great things. It's not just glory all the time, but it's not just affliction all the time either.

We live in between two worlds - we know the end of the story, but we're still living out the middle chapters. And so we have mountains, but we have faith. We have to pay taxes, but we know God will take care of us. We have sickness, but pray to the one who can heal. We don't always like the way things are going, but we know God is with us in every situation.

Our job is to keep the faith - sometimes it's big, sometimes it seems small - but we would be fools to walk through this life thinking we can do it on our own. We pray. We trust. We wait. We worship. We ask questions. We listen to the Lord's answers. All the while following our rabbi, the one who doesn't just know the way, but who *is* the way.