

OUR LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE
FAITH AS A MUSTARD SEED
Increasing our Faith

August 13, 2017
10th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

Gospel: Matthew 17:14-23
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 4:9-16

Today’s Gospel lesson is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the West, the account from Mark used to be used for the Second Sunday in Lent. More recently, all use of this Gospel lesson from any of the three Gospels has been disappearing from common usage. In the Orthodox lectionary, today’s Gospel lesson is used twice: here from Matthew 17 where the theme is faith and also for the 4th Sunday of Lent where the theme will be fasting and prayer. The Epistle lesson is not used at all in the Western lectionary. In the Orthodox lectionary, the Epistle lesson is also used for the Feast Days of many of the Twelve Apostles.

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Epistle: 1 Corinthians 4:9-16

There have been many people throughout the ages who think that the things they do in secret are hidden from the eyes of God. For example, murderers often think, “The Lord does not see...” (Psalm 94:7), slanderers often say, “Who can see them?” (Psalm 64:2-6), and adulterers think that, “No eye will see me” because their activities are private and in the dark (Job 24:15). But Paul says that “there is no creature hidden from His sight but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13). Paul speaks of the Lord’s return when He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness (1 Corinthians 4:5) and judge the secrets of men (Romans 2:16). Thus everything we do – even the most private things – we do as if it were in a fishbowl with many observers looking in.

The Spectacle of the Apostles in Their Work

The Epistle lesson begins with Paul’s statement that he and the other Apostles have been displayed as a spectacle (Greek: *theatron* meaning theatre or showtime) to the world, both to

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angels and to men (1 Corinthians 4:9). Why to angels? Table I is a brief summary of New Testament references to the function of angels; that is, a list of the things angels are recorded as doing.

One of the things angels do is witness human affairs and the working out of our salvation. Angels desire very much to look into the things the Prophets ministered (literally deaconed) to us, and the evangelization of the Church by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:12). The writer of Hebrews cautions his readers not to forget to entertain strangers; they may be angels looking in on human affairs (Hebrews 13:2). When one sinner repents as a result of the Holy Spirit's evangelism, there is joy in the presence of the angels (Luke 15:10). When Paul set Timothy up as overseer (1 Timothy 5:21), Paul charged him before God, the Lord Jesus and the angels (who look in) to do things right.

**TABLE I
WHAT ANGELS DO**

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Surround Throne of God | Hebrews 12:22 |
| 2. Always see Face of the Father | Matthew 18:10 |
| 3. Witness Christ's confession of us | Mark 8:38, Luke 12:8-9; 9:26 |
| 4. Are subject to Christ | 1 Peter 3:22 |
| 5. Are personal servants of Christ | Matthew 4:6, 11; 26:53, Mark 1:13, John 1:51 |
| 6. Passed Law on to men | Acts 7:53, Galatians 3:19 |
| 7. Sang praise to God at nativity | Luke 2:15 |
| 8. Don't judge anyone | 2 Peter 2:11 |
| 9. Are witnesses to human affairs | Luke 15:10, 1 Corinthians 4:9, 1 Timothy 3:16; 5:21, Hebrews 13:2, 1 Peter 1:12 |
| 10. Guard Children | Matthew 18:10 |
| 11. Don't marry; we'll be like them | Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34-36 |
| 12. Gather righteous at 2 nd Coming | Matthew 13:39-49; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31, Mark 13:27 |
| 13. Don't know time of 2 nd Coming | Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32 |
| 14. Are judged by the righteous | 1 Corinthians 6:3 |

Quoting an ancient hymn or creed, Paul referred to the mystery of godliness as having at least six parts (from 1 Timothy 3:16):

- The incarnation
- Justified in the Spirit (baptism and resurrection) see Matthew 3:16, Romans 1:4
- Seen by angels
- Preached among the Gentiles
- Believed on in the world
- Received up in glory

Most of us would see the incarnation, justification, preaching, believing and receiving as a much bigger deal than just being seen by angels. Perhaps that's because we're so focused on our own human affairs that we don't realize that we are in the fishbowl and they are all watching us.

John Chrysostom commented¹ that there is more to this than meets the eye, and that Paul was speaking of a very severe rule of life.

“There is a great depth of meaning and severity implied in (Paul’s) saying...’us the Apostles’ who are enduring such innumerable ills, who are sowing the word of godliness, who are leading you to this severe rule of life. But what does ‘unto angels’ mean? It is possible to ‘become a spectacle unto men’, but not so to angels when the things done are ordinary. But our wrestling is such as to be worthy even of angelic contemplations”.

Clement of Alexandria stated² that there is contempt for the Faith on the part of the multitude. As a result, Paul’s words are not appreciated and his work is not understood.

“To the multitude, the vain labor of stuffing themselves to satiety like cattle is desirable. But to us the apostle says, ‘Now we know this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin’ (Romans 6:6). Does not the apostle then plainly add the following, to show the contempt for faith in the case of the multitude? ‘For I think that God has set forth us the apostles last, as appointed to death we are made a spectacle to the world, and to angels, and to men. Up to this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are beaten, and are feeble, and labor, working with our hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat; we are become as it were the off scouring of the world’ (1 Corinthians 4:9-13). Such also are the words of Plato in the *Republic*: ‘The just man, though stretched on the rack, though his eyes are dug out, will be happy’”.

Tertullian stated³ that the “spectacle to the world” does not refer to just unbelievers but to both men and angels, both of whom have work to do in the world.

“He has promised Christ to be a Light, and He has declared Himself to be a lamp, ‘searching the hearts and reins’ (Psalm 7:9 LXX). From Him also shall ‘praise be had by every man’ (1 Corinthians 4:5); from Him proceeds also, as from a judge, the opposite of praise. You say he interprets the world to be the God thereof, when he says, ‘We are made a spectacle to the world, and to angels, and to men’ (1 Corinthians 4:9). If by world he had meant the people, he would not have afterwards specially mentioned ‘*men*’. The Holy Spirit has providentially explained the meaning of the passage thus, ‘We are made a spectacle to the world’, *i.e.* ‘both to *angels*’, who minister therein, ‘and to *men*’, who are the objects of their ministrations”.

So what is Paul doing that is worthy of angelic contemplation? He and others are:

- Morons because of Christ
- Weak or feeble
- Dishonored
- Hungry and thirsty

¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XII, 6.

² Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 7.

³ Tertullian, Five Book Against Marcion, II, ii, v, 7.

- Poorly clad
- Punched out (with the fist)
- Homeless
- Working with their hands
- Reviled
- Persecuted
- Defamed
- Refuse (lit. Pot scrubbing) of the world
- Off scouring (lit. floor sweepings) of all things

Yet Paul said that the Corinthians claimed to be:

- Wise in Christ
- Strong
- Held in Honor

Chrysostom then went on⁴ to say that if men were looking on, no one would choose to commit adultery and fornication. In the sight of God, men not only commit adultery and fornication, but other things also that are much more dreadful. When we commit uncleanness, we fear men more than God; we have thus subjected ourselves unto them and made them lords over us.

“There are many other things also which seem to these our lords to be evil, but aren’t; these we flee for our part in like manner. For instance to live in poverty, many account disgraceful; and we flee poverty not because it is disgraceful nor because we are so persuaded, but because our masters count it to be disgraceful and we fear them. Again, to be dishonored and contemptible and void of all authority seems likewise to the most part a matter of great shame. This again we flee, not condemning the thing itself, but because of the sentence of our masters”.

“Again on the contrary side also, we undergo the same mischief. As wealth is counted a good thing, and pride, and pomp, and to be conspicuous; accordingly this we pursue. Not from considering the nature of the things as good, but persuaded by the opinion of our masters. This master is savage and a severe tyrant; not so much as a command was being needed in order to make us listen to him. It is enough that we just know what he wills, and without a word we submit; so great a good will do we bear toward him. God may threaten and admonish day by day but we don’t hear that. But the common people, our master, made up of all manner of the dregs of society, have no occasion for one word of command. Enough for it only to signify with what it is well pleased, and in all things we obey immediately”.

Our Imitation of the Apostles

Paul spoke to the Corinthians as a father, since he had founded the Church in Corinth. As a father desiring to correct his spiritual children, Paul could have returned to Corinth with a “rod” (1 Corinthians 4:21) to discipline them. But he preferred to come in a spirit of gentleness.

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XII, 8.

As a father, he urged the Corinthians to imitate him (1 Corinthians 4:16) as an example, as we all imitate our parents.

Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out⁵ that it is not only a natural father who is called “father” in the Scriptures. Paul, Job, Christ and Joseph are all called a “father” for people other than their natural children.

“In the Divine Scriptures the natural father is not the only one called ‘father’. Paul was father of the Corinthians, not by having begotten them after the flesh, but by having taught and begotten them again after the Spirit (1 Corinthians 4:15). Hear Job also said, ‘I was a father of the needy’ (Job 29:16); for he called himself a father, not as having begotten them all, but as caring for them. And God’s Only-begotten Son Himself, when nailed in His flesh to the tree at the time of crucifixion, on seeing Mary, His own Mother according to the flesh, and John, the most beloved of His disciples, said to him, ‘Behold! your mother’, and to her, ‘Behold! your Son’ (John 19:26-27). He taught her the parental affection due to him, and indirectly explained that which is said in Luke, ‘and His father and His mother marveled at Him’ (Luke 2:33): words which the tribe of heretics snatches up, saying that He was begotten of a man and a woman. For as Mary was called the mother of John, because of her parental affection, not from having given him birth, so Joseph also was called the father of Christ, not from having begotten Him, but because of the care bestowed on His nurture”.

How do we imitate Paul and the other Apostles as the fathers of the Faith? By our strictness and dedication to the things of the Lord! If we can see ourselves as in a fishbowl, where the angels and the bodiless powers are constantly watching to see how we will do, we will gain a better perspective. To this end, tribulation may be helpful, even if it is very unpleasant.

John Chrysostom stated⁶ that tribulation is expedient for us, as we imitate the Master. If he took the path of affliction while we take the path of ease and comfort, it may be open to question whether we are on the same path.

“For a great, a truly great consolation are both the sufferings of Christ, and those of the Apostles. For He so well knew that this is the better way of virtue, as even to go that way Himself, not having need thereof. He knew so well that tribulation is expedient for us, and that it becomes rather a foundation for repose. For hear Him saying, ‘If a man take not his cross, and follow after Me, he is not worthy of Me’ (Matthew 10:38). If you are a disciple, He means, imitate the Master, for this is to be a disciple. But if He went by the path of affliction and you go by that of ease, you no longer tread the same path, which He trod, but another. How then do you follow, when you don’t follow? How shall you be a disciple, not going after the Master? This Paul also says, ‘We are weak, but you are strong; we are despised, but you are honored’ (1 Corinthians 4:10). How is it reasonable, he means, that we should be striving after opposite things, and yet that you should be disciples and we teachers?”

⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, VII, 9.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXVIII, 6.

Ambrose of Milan stated⁷ that part of Paul's humility in his persecution was his repentance for persecution of the Church. This was like plowing land in order to remove brambles and produce good fruit.

“Let us then not be ashamed to confess our sins unto the Lord. Shame indeed there is when each makes known his sins; but that shame, as it were, plows his land, removes the ever-recurring brambles, prunes the thorns, and gives life to the fruits which he believed were dead. Follow him who, by diligently plowing his field, sought for eternal fruit. ‘Being reviled we bless, being persecuted we endure, being defamed we entreat, we are made as the off scouring of the world’ (1 Corinthians 4:13). If you plow after this fashion you will sow spiritual seed. Plow that you may get rid of sin and gain fruit. Paul plowed so as to destroy in himself the last tendency to persecution of the Church. What more could Christ give to lead us on to the pursuit of perfection, than to convert and then give us for a teacher one who was a persecutor?”

Dionysius the Great of Alexandria gave⁸ an example of how the saints of his day (3rd Century) interpreted Paul's words about seeking humility in the helping of others. By sacrificing themselves and their own comfort, they received the martyr's crown.

“Certainly very many of our brethren, while, in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness, did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril. They ministered to them, and treated them for their healing in Christ; they died from time to time most joyfully along with them, bringing on themselves pains derived from others. They drew upon themselves their neighbors' diseases, and willingly took over to their own persons the burden of the sufferings of those around them. And many who had thus cured others of their sicknesses, and restored them to strength, died themselves, having transferred to their own bodies the death that lay upon these. And that common saying, which otherwise seemed always to be only a polite form of address, they expressed in actual fact, as they departed this life, like the ‘off scouring of all’ (1 Corinthians 4: 13). The very best of our brethren have departed this life in this manner, including some presbyters and some deacons, and among the people those who were in highest reputation. Because of the distinguished piety and the steadfast faith, which were exhibited in it, this form of death appeared to come in nothing short of martyrdom itself”.

The Problem in Corinth

The Corinthians had tolerated sexual immorality such as was not even named among the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 5:1). They had separated into cliques: some of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Peter, etc. (1 Corinthians 1:12). Paul could not speak to them as spiritual people but as fleshly people, who needed milk and not solid food (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). If the Corinthians thought they were wise in Christ, strong and held in honor, the question is: who says so? Paul thought they were puffed up and was planning to come to see what power was behind their haughtiness (1 Corinthians 4:18-21). Paul's aim was to get the Corinthians to imitate him (1

⁷ Ambrose, Two Books Concerning Repentance, II, 5.

⁸ Dionysius, “Epistle to the Alexandrians”, XII, 4, in Extant Fragments, VI.

Corinthians 4:16) and focus on what God considers good rather than what their peers consider good.

To help them with this, he sent Timothy (one of the Seventy who had been traveling with Paul for about seven years at this point) on ahead to remind them of Paul's ways in Christ (1 Corinthians 4:17). The Corinthians had become somewhat puffed up (1 Corinthians 4:18, 19; 5:2) but were unaware of their problem (which everyone outside the fishbowl could see). Paul was diligent to point this out as a loving father concerned for his children (1 Corinthians 4:14-15).

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul had mentioned the Word of the Cross. This is the Lord's way and this was Paul's way and it produces much angelic contemplation regarding how the Lord will work it out. The Corinthians needed to learn that and as we'll see, the Twelve Apostles in the Gospel lesson needed to learn that also. Sometimes we don't see the reasons for our crosses for many years, and we should consider the lessons to be learned from the patriarch Job (Job 1-2).

Chrysostom stated⁹ that Paul put it this way to shame them and was leading up to addressing the immoral man, who had his father's wife, in the next chapter.

“How can it be that you should be wise and we fools in the things relating to Christ? Here he sets himself against the noble and those who plumed themselves upon external advantages. How can it be that the Apostles are beaten and despised and dishonored and esteemed as nothing, while the Corinthians enjoy honor and are looked up to by many as a wise and prudent kind of people? We (the Apostles) take no account of outward pomp, but we look to God only. This everyone needs to practice in every place. For not only are angels looking on, but even more than they: He that presides over the spectacle”.

“Let us not then desire any others to applaud us. For this is to insult Him; hurrying past Him, as if He were insufficient to admire us, we make our way quickly to our fellow servants. Just as they who contend in a small theatre seek a larger audience, as if this were insufficient for their display, so also do they. Contending in the sight of God, they are not content; afterwards they seek the applause of men. Giving up the greater praise and eager for the lesser, they draw upon themselves severe punishment. This turns everything upside down”.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XII, 6-7.

FAITH AS A MUSTARD SEED

Increasing our Faith

August 13, 2017
10th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

Gospel: Matthew 17:14-23, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-42

The subject of today's Gospel lesson is also used for the Fourth Sunday in Lent where the reading is from Mark 9. There the theme is fasting and prayer. Here, using the reading from Matthew, the theme is a faith that can move mountains.

The Inability of the Twelve to Cast Out the Demon

The Gospel lesson took place on the day following the Transfiguration (Luke 9:37), which occurred in mid-late summer, 29 AD, or just before the Feast of Tabernacles¹⁰. The Twelve had been sent out two-by-two to heal the sick, cast out demons, cleanse lepers and raise the dead (Matthew 10:5-8). And they were very successful at this. But in today's Reading, a man brought them his demon-possessed son and they could do nothing for him (Matthew 17:14-16). Perhaps the disciples were a little puffed up (like the Corinthians) from their successes. A little later James and John asked to sit at the Lord's Right and Left Hand in the Kingdom (Matthew 20:20-21). Later, The disciples would learn about fasting and prayer as a way of life (Matthew 9:14-15, Acts 13:3, 2 Corinthians 6:5), about true humility as Paul spoke of (1 Corinthians 4:9-13; Titus 3:2; James 4:6, 10; 1 Peter 5:5-6), and become themselves worthy of angelic contemplation in their struggles.

John Chrysostom pointed out that the father of the demon-possessed boy blamed the disciples for being unable to help when the father was exceedingly weak in faith himself. When Jesus questioned the father, He said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). The father then confessed, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). Chrysostom stated¹¹:

"Observe Christ's providence and His beneficence during the whole time, during which He allowed the devil to be in the child. Surely the man had been favored with much providential care, or the child would have perished long ago; for 'it cast him both into the fire and into the water' (Matthew 17:15). And the demon that dared to do this would assuredly have destroyed the man too, unless God had His strong curb on him. This was also the case with those naked men that were running in the deserts and cutting themselves with stones" (Mark 5:5).

In referring to the Twelve and the boy's father, Jesus used different forms of the word faith or belief (Greek: *pistia*). When the Twelve asked why they couldn't cast out the demon, Jesus said, "Because of your little-faith", or *oligo-pistia* (Matthew 17:20). Referring to the

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¹⁰ For the chronology of events, see the Feast of the Transfiguration August 6th.

¹¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 3.

boy's father, Jesus said, "O unbelieving or *apistos* generation" (Mark 9:9). The boy's father later said (Mark 9:24), I believe (Greek: *pisteuo*); help my unbelief (Greek: *apistia*). From *apistia*, the opposite of *pistia*, we get the English word apostasy. Thus Jesus chided the Twelve for having too little faith, but He was angry at the boy's father for having apostatized.

Cyril of Alexandria was similarly angry¹² that the boy's father was not very gracious in his approach to the Lord. Crying out to the Lord (Luke 9:38), he proceeded to find fault with the Apostles and to subject them to public ridicule (Mark 9:18) where the Scribes were disputing with the Apostles about this also (Mark 9:14). What he was actually doing was finding fault with the Grace of God, and Jesus was justifiably angry.

"It was the duty of the father of the lad to lay the blame upon his own unbelief (Mark 9:23-24), rather than upon the holy Apostles. For this reason Christ justly called out, 'O unbelieving and perverse generation; how long shall I be with you; how long shall I put up with you?' (Mark 9:19). He justly therefore calls both the man himself, and those of like-mind, an apostate generation. For it is a sickness, and whoever is seized by it is perverse and utterly without knowledge to walk uprightly."

For the man, Cyril said, found fault with the Grace given to the Apostles and not with the Apostles themselves. This is blasphemy, for the Grace given them was Christ's and Christ was justifiably angry. It would have been deserved had the father of the demoniac gone away disappointed. But that no man might imagine that Christ was unable to work the miracle, He did it anyway and forbid the demon to enter the boy again lest the father's apostasy cause recurring problems.

John Chrysostom added¹³ to this that while the father had no belief at all, "If You can do anything, help us" (Mark 9:22), others who came to Jesus were not like that. For example, the leper said, "If You are willing You can make me clean" (Matthew 8:2). Jesus responded to the father by playing his words back to him, "If you can believe all things are possible" (Mark 9:23). "While the father uttered speech that was in no way worthy of His power, Jesus proceeded to show him that even he (the father) could do this and much more. In fact, the Lord's care had been apparent even before the father brought his son to Jesus. For the demon (Mark 9:22) had thrown the boy both into the fire and into the water to destroy him, but to no avail." Yet the boy's father was very ungrateful for this.

Reasons that Prayers are Heard

Jesus' statement, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" requires some explanation. John Cassian stated¹⁴ that there are different reasons why prayers are answered, and

¹² Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 52, Chapter 9, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

¹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 3.

¹⁴ John Cassian, First Conference of Abbot Isaac, I, ix, 34.

we will be addressing items 2 and 4 in this study¹⁵. This comes from the words of the gospels and of the prophets, which teach us that there are varied and changing conditions of souls.

1. **Agreement:** An answer to prayer can be obtained in the case of the agreement of two persons. As the Lord said: “If two of you shall agree upon earth concerning anything for which they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father, which is in heaven” (Matthew 18:19).
2. **Fullness of Faith:** The fullness of faith can be compared to a grain of mustard-seed. “For if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say unto this mountain: Be removed, and it shall be removed; and nothing shall be impossible to you” (Matthew 17:20).
3. **Continuance in Prayer:** The Lord spoke of unwearied perseverance in petitioning: “For, truly, I say unto you that if not because of his friendship, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as much as he needs” (Luke 11:8). A form of continuance in prayer exists in the fruits of almsgiving: “Shut up alms in the heart of the poor and it shall pray for you in the time of tribulation” (Ecclesiasticus 29:12).
4. **Purified Life:** The purifying of one’s life and works of mercy can answer prayer, as it is said: “Loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the burdens that oppress”. After a few words in which the barrenness of an unfruitful fast is rebuked, “then,” he says, “you shall call and the Lord shall hear you; you shall cry, and He shall say, Here I am” (Isaiah 58:6, 9).
5. **Persecution:** Sometimes excess of trouble causes prayer to be heard, as it is said: “When I was in trouble, I called unto the Lord, and He heard me” (Psalm 120:1). And again, “Afflict not the stranger for if he cries unto Me, I will hear him, for I am merciful” (Exodus 22:21, 27)

“You see then in how many ways the gift of an answer may be obtained, so that no one need be crushed by the despair of his conscience for securing those things, which are eternal. For if in contemplating our wretchedness I admit that we are utterly destitute of all those virtues, which we mentioned above. Yet He most graciously promises to grant whatever they have perseveringly hoped for; saying, ‘Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. Everyone that asks receives; he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks, it shall be opened’” (Luke 11:9-10).

John Chrysostom stated¹⁶ that fasting and prayer go together, and that fasting can lead to a greater faith and to more effective prayer. The Twelve Apostles did this most of their lives.

“But by faith here He means that which related to the miracles, and mentions a mustard seed, to declare its unspeakable power. But marvel also at their self-denial, and the might of the Spirit! Their self-denial in not hiding their fault¹⁷, and the might of the Spirit in so leading on by degrees them who had not so much as a gram of mustard seed, that rivers and fountains of faith sprang up within them. Do you see how He now proceeds to lay beforehand in them the foundation of His doctrine about fasting? It is an impossible thing, if one is living luxuriously, to cause deliverance from such demonic oppression”.

¹⁵ Item 1 is addressed in the Study for the Gospel Lesson for the Special Feast Day of the Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29th; item 3 is addressed in the Study of the Gospel Lesson for the 5th Sunday in Lent; and item 5 is addressed in the Study for the Publican and the Pharisee (four Sundays before Lent starts).

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, LVII, 4-5.

¹⁷ That is, in being unable to heal the child.

“‘And yet, if faith is required’, one may say, ‘what is there need of fasting?’ Because, together with our faith, that also brings no small power! For it both implants much strictness, and of a man makes one an angel, and fights against the incorporeal powers; yet not by itself, but prayer too is needed, and prayer must come first”.

“See, at any rate, how many blessings spring from them both. For he that is praying as he ought, and fasting, has not many wants, and he that has not many wants, cannot be covetous; he that is not covetous, will be also more disposed for almsgiving. He that fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness, and quenches his wicked lusts, and propitiates God, and humbles his soul when lifted up. Therefore even the Apostles were almost always fasting. He that prays with fasting has his wings double, and lighter than the winds. For neither does he gape, nor stretch himself, nor grow torpid in prayer, as is the case with most men, but is more vehement than fire, and rises above the earth. Wherefore also such a one is most especially a hater and an enemy to the evil spirits. Nothing is mightier than a man who prays sincerely”.

Ambrose of Milan contrasted¹⁸ the pleasures of food, which deprived us of Paradise, with fasting and prayer, which revealed the things of God. Those who reject fasting parrot the voice of the heathen, who have no hope of things to come. The saints advance in their prayer life when they fast.

“Holy Scripture teaches us that pleasure was suggested to Adam and Eve by the enticement of the serpent. The passions of pleasure are various and slippery, and as it were infected with the poison of corruption. Adam was deceived by the desire of pleasure and fell away from the commandment of God and from the enjoyment of grace. Pleasure cannot recall us to Paradise, seeing that it alone deprived us of it!”

“The Lord Jesus, wishing to make us stronger against the temptations of the devil, fasted when about to contend with him, that we might know that we can in no other way overcome the enticement of evil. Further, the devil himself hurled the first dart of his temptations from the quiver of pleasure, saying, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread’. The Lord replied, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God’ (Matthew 4:3-4), and would not do it”.

“What is the intention of the Scripture, which teaches us that Peter fasted, and that the revelation concerning the baptism of Gentiles was made to him when fasting and praying? (Acts 10:10) This shows that the Saints themselves advance when they fast. Finally, Moses received the Law when he was fasting (Exodus 34:28); and so Peter when fasting was taught the grace of the New Testament. Daniel, by virtue of his fast, stopped the mouths of the lions (Daniel 6) and saw the events of future times (Daniel 9:3, 20-27). And what safety can there be for us unless we wash away our sins by fasting, since Scripture says that fasting and alms do away sin?” (Tobit 12:8-9)

“Who then are these new teachers who reject the merit of fasting? Is it not the voice of heathen who say, ‘Let us eat and drink?’, whom the Apostle ridicules,

¹⁸ Ambrose of Milan, Epistles, LXIII, 14-17.

when he says: ‘If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what is it an advantage to me if the dead do not rise? Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (1 Corinthians 15:32). That is to say, ‘What is the profit of my contention even to death, except that I might redeem my body? And it is redeemed in vain if there is no hope of the resurrection. And, consequently, if all hope of the resurrection is lost, let us eat and drink, let us not lose the enjoyment of things present, who have no hope of things to come. It is then for them to indulge in meats and drinks, who hope for nothing after death’.

The Fullness of Faith: Answer #2 to Prayer

Jesus spoke on a number of occasions of the size of one’s faith. Some people exhibited great faith, such as the centurion (Matthew 8:10), while the Twelve exhibited small faith on this occasion (Matthew 17:20). Jesus compared faith to the size of a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20). A mustard seed is roughly half the size of a sesame seed, much smaller than the seeds of wheat, barley, rice, bean, etc. Yet some species of mustard grow to be small trees. On other occasions (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19), Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed, which grew to be a tree large enough for birds to roost in its branches. Faith and the Kingdom of God go together in that both require the vision to see beyond this present life to what else is really there. Today’s Gospel lesson is the first occasion that Jesus is recorded as saying that if one had faith as a mustard seed, one could move a mountain from here to there, and that nothing would be impossible (Matthew 17:20).

About six months later in early 30 AD, the Twelve asked Jesus to increase their faith. He replied, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea’, and it would obey you” (Luke 17:5-6). This reference is to the Black Mulberry, which grows 20-30 feet tall and was used for its fruit and today for wine also. This is not the same tree as the White Mulberry tree that is used in the silkworm industry.

In contrast to faith is doubt in one’s heart (Mark 11:23). James said, “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man (literally two-souled); unstable in all his ways (James 1:6-8). Paul spoke similarly to the Ephesians, that they should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting (Ephesians 4:14). This was the problem with the boy’s father in the Gospel lesson.

Commenting on the disciples’ faith in the Gospel lesson, Chrysostom stated¹⁹ that when the Twelve came to Jesus after being unable to cast out the demon, they were anxious that somehow they had lost the ability to do so. The disciples were in a very imperfect state by comparison before the cross (i.e. compared to after Pentecost). Certain saints after them are said

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 4.

actually to have moved mountains when necessity called for it.” For example: Gregory of Neocaesarea²⁰ and Mark the Ascetic. Yet the Twelve did greater works than this.

“The Twelve did far greater things, having raised up innumerable dead. For it is not at all the same thing, to move a mountain, and to remove death from a body. And certain saints after them, far inferior to them, are said actually to have moved mountains, when necessity called for it. The Twelve would have done the same, if need called them to do so. But if there was then no need for it, do not find fault. He Himself did not say, ‘You shall surely move mountains’, but ‘You shall be able to do even this’. And if they did it not, it was not because they were unable (how could this be, when they had power to do the greater things?), but because they did not need to do it”.

To illustrate this imperfection from another viewpoint, Paul mentioned later on that having the gift of great faith is not the most excellent way. “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13:2). The more excellent way is love, because love makes us able to handle and direct the other gifts without pride or arrogance, and love gives us a vision beyond this present life.

To illustrate the “imperfect state” of the disciples, they were exceedingly sorrowful when Jesus told them that He was about to be betrayed, killed and resurrected. Moses and Elijah weren’t sorrowful when they discussed this the day before! The disciples were sorrowful; they didn’t have a vision yet beyond this present life; and they didn’t understand the Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18), where unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it can’t produce any fruit (John 12:23-25). Moses, Elijah and the angels understood something of this. They didn’t understand it completely, but then neither did Satan. If he had understood, he wouldn’t have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8). But the angels did realize that the Lord was in charge; because of this, they are so eager to look into the state of human affairs and are fascinated and amazed how the Lord works it out.

Jerome noted²¹ examples of many people who had exceptional faith without having much theological understanding. In his humility, Jerome was not sure that he himself would fare that well if it was done to him according to his faith – such as happened to some people.

“The faith we seek is that of which the Lord himself said, ‘Your faith has made you whole’ (Matthew 9:22). And elsewhere, of the centurion, ‘I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel’ (Matthew 8:10). And again, to the Apostles, ‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’ (Matthew 8:26) In another place also, ‘If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say unto this mountain, move from here to there, and it shall move’ (Matthew 17:20). Neither the centurion nor the poor woman, who for twelve years was wasting away with a flow of blood, had believed in the mysteries of the Trinity, for these were revealed to the Apostles after the resurrection of Christ. The faith of such as believe in the

²⁰ Gregory of NeoCaesarea is sometimes called “Gregory Thaumaturgus”, meaning Gregory the Wonder-worker; he is remembered on November 17th. Mark the Ascetic, whose teacher was John Chrysostom, is remembered on March 5th.

²¹ Jerome, Dialogue Against the Luciferians, 15.

mystery of the Trinity should have its due preeminence. It was her singleness of mind and her devotion to her God that met with our Lord's approval. 'For she said to herself, If only I may touch his garment, I shall be made well' (Matthew 9:21). This is the faith, which our Lord said was seldom found. This is the faith, which even in the case of those who believe rightly, is hard to find in perfection".

"According to your faith, let be it done to you' (Matthew 9:29), says God. I do not like the sound of those words. If it be done unto me according to my faith, I shall perish. And yet I certainly believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I believe in one God; nevertheless, I would not have it done unto me according to my faith. For the enemy often comes, and sows tares in the Lord's harvest. I do not mean to imply that anything is greater than the purity of heart, which believes that mystery; but undoubted faith towards God is hard indeed to find".

Chrysostom continued²² to say that there is a difference between miracles and healing, where the gift of miracles is greater due to greater faith.

"The Apostles asked Him, saying, 'Increase our faith' (Luke 17:5) for this is the mother of the miracles. But to possess the power of working miracles and gifts of healing, is not the same thing. He that had a gift of healing used only to do cures; but he that possessed powers for working miracles used to punish also. For a miracle could be healing only, but could also involve punishing, even as Paul inflicted blindness (Acts 13:8-12) and as Peter slew Ananias" (Acts 5:4-6).

Ambrose of Milan stated²³ that the term "moving mountains" could also refer to high things that exalt themselves, such as the palaces of Satan, against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5). To deal with these things also takes great faith.

"What are these palaces, except the palace of Satan, of whom the Lord said, 'How shall His kingdom stand?' (Luke 11:18) The things, which are the devil's palaces, are truly mountains, and therefore in the fall of those palaces from the hearts of the faithful, the truth stands revealed, that Christ, Son of God, is of the Father's eternal substance. What, again, are those mountains of bronze, from the midst of which four chariots come?" (Zechariah 6:1)

"We behold that height, lifting up itself against the knowledge of God, cast down by the word of the Lord, when the Son of God said, 'Be quiet, and come out, you unclean spirit' (Mark 1:25). Concerning whom the prophet also said, 'Behold, I am against you, you mountain²⁴ of corruption!'" (Jeremiah 51:25 LXX)

The Relationship of Great Faith to Works: Answer #4 to Prayer

Continuing His answer to their request to increase their faith, Jesus went on to say some things regarding works, and that this often escapes our notice in this context. Speaking of a slave and a slave-owner, when a slave comes home from working all day at plowing or tending sheep,

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXIX, 5.

²³ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, III, xiv, 117-118.

²⁴ Jeremiah's reference to "The Mountain of corruption" was Babylon.

the slave owner does not say, “Come at once and sit down to eat” (Luke 17:7). Rather the slave-owner instructs the slave to first fix him something to eat; after the slave-owner has eaten and drunk, then the slave himself can eat and drink. For doing this, the slave-owner does not thank the slave, the slave is merely doing his job. The Lord concludes with, “So likewise you, when you have done all those things, which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable slaves. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Luke 17:8-10).

One might ask, "How does this increase our faith?" It certainly puts our life in perspective and gives us a realistic appraisal of where things stand. It also gives us a more humble attitude. If we think of ourselves in terms of the unprofitable slave, we might ask ourselves how many times have we been so busy about our affairs, which includes even doing the Lord’s work that we find ourselves unable to take time out to go to church and offer praise to God?

The Lord gave a further clarification of this on the Tuesday of Holy Week, 30 AD. Coming from Bethany to Jerusalem in the morning, Jesus was hungry and looked for some figs on a fig tree²⁵. Finding nothing but leaves, the Lord said, “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again” (Mark 11:12-14). The next day as they passed the same fig tree, they saw it withered up from the roots. Peter was stunned! (Mark 11:20-22).

Jesus replied, “Have faith in God. For assuredly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and cast into the sea’, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mark 11:23-24).

Jesus continued with a statement that we might consider totally irrelevant: “And when you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mark 11:25-26).

We might ask: “What does forgiving one another have to do with increasing one’s faith? Too often, we look at faith as separate from works. Yet James, the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1:19), stated that faith is made perfect by works²⁶, one is justified (under some conditions) by works, and faith without works is dead (James 2:22, 25, 26).

Included in “works” are such good deeds as serving our Lord and King even when we’re tired, and forgiving our fellow slaves. We show our faith by our works (James 2:18). Therefore works such as these increase our faith, and our faith is made alive and perfect by demonstrating it in a tangible way to others.

²⁵ Fig trees often have two crops; one in the spring and another larger crop in the fall. Yet this occasion was too early for even the Spring crop.

²⁶ For more discussion on works, see the Epistle lesson for the Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils (July 13-19) and the Epistle lesson for the 5th Sunday of Lent.

Jesus had said that after the Holy Spirit comes, His followers would do greater works than He had done Himself. John Chrysostom stated²⁷ that the Twelve exhibited the kind of faith that could move mountains and that they did do greater works than the Master.

“For even the shadow of Peter raised a dead man; and so the power of Christ was the more proclaimed. It was not so wonderful that He while alive should work miracles, as that when He was dead others should be enabled to work in His name greater than He did. This was an indisputable proof of the Resurrection! Even if everyone had seen the Resurrection, it would not have been equally believed. For men might have said that it was an appearance. But seeing that by His name alone greater miracles were wrought than when He conversed with men, one could not disbelieve unless he were truly senseless”.

²⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXIII, 3.