

Making Prayer Your Second Language

“How To Pray When You Have Very Little Faith”

Matthew 17:20-21

For several weeks now I have been preaching through a series of sermons entitled **Making Prayer Your Second Language**. Now most of us realize that one of the key ingredients in effective prayer is **faith**.

The Bible says in the book of **James, chapter 1**, “**If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord**” (James 1:5-7 NIV).

There’s an old gospel song that says it like this: “**Prayer is the key to heaven but faith unlocks the door.**” Prayer without faith would be like having a Maserati with no engine. It would look great, powerful, impressive—the problem is it just wouldn’t get you anywhere!

And so it is with prayer that lacks faith. You can say all of the right words. You can be persistent, persuasive, passionate, poignant, articulate, and eloquent, but if you lack faith then you are little more than a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

It’s like shooting blanks with a rifle. It makes a lot of noise but it really doesn’t do anything.

And so here is what I want to talk about this morning. **What do you do if you don’t have much faith?** *What do you do if faith in God is a real struggle for you?* You want to hope, you want to believe, you want to pray, but you’re one of those persons in life who is just a natural-born skeptic.

You’re kind of like **Thomas**, one of Jesus’ disciples, who inspired that term, that tag, that label, a “*doubting Thomas*.” He wasn’t one who got carried away by emotions. He wasn’t one of those individuals

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who is always dreaming dreams and seeing visions and living in the metaphysical world. He was a man who depended upon and trusted in facts.

When his friends came to him overflowing with excitement and joy that first Easter Sunday and said, “***We have seen Jesus. He’s alive! He has risen from the grave!***” Thomas said, “***Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it***” (John 20:25 NIV).

You have to show me! Give me evidence, give me proof, let me see; then I will believe. **Is there a place in the Kingdom of God for people like that?** That’s what I want to talk about this morning. I suspect that in a crowd of people like this there are many of you who wrestle with this issue of faith.

You want to believe in the power of prayer. You want to believe that God really is “***able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine***” (Ephesians 3:20 NIV). You want to believe that God really can do supernatural things in your life, in your marriage, in your home, in your church, in your community; but the fact of that matter is you don’t have all that much faith that God can or will really do it.

It’s been one disappointment after another. You’ve tried. You’ve prayed. You’ve taken a step of faith...but nothing happened, nothing changed. The problem is still there. And so you have sat through this whole series of sermons on prayer and thought silently to yourself, “***Yeah...but!***”

If that’s where you are...if you’ve been kind of beating yourself up because you don’t have a lot of faith...if you find it difficult to believe...I have an encouraging word of hope for you this morning

from God's Word. Listen to what Jesus says in **Matthew 17:20**.

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there" and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

(Matthew 17:20-21 NIV)

Now, listen, a mustard seed isn't very large at all. They are about one

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tiny little millimeter in diameter. And, yet, Jesus says that if we have faith as small as a tiny little mustard seed then we can say to whatever mountain is standing in front of us, blocking our path, ***"Move from here to there,"*** and it will move. ***"Nothing will be impossible for you."***

Some people think you need faith as big as a mountain to move a mustard seed! That's not what Jesus says. He says, *"If you have just a little bit of faith, so tiny that you can hardly see it, miracles can and will happen in your life. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

So if you're sitting here this morning and thinking to yourself, ***"Man, I can't be a person of prayer. I can't make prayer a second language in my life. I don't have much faith!"*** Be encouraged. There is a word from the Lord for you today.

So here's the question: **How can I pray when I have very little faith?** The answer to that question is found right in Scripture. Please take your Bibles and turn to the book of **Mark**. It's the second book in the New Testament...Matthew and then Mark. Turn to the **9th chapter** and we are going to begin reading with that **14th verse**.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's

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father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and dumb spirit," he said. "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

(Mark

9:14-27 NIV)

Matthew's account of this story then adds these words. ***"And he was healed from that moment"*** (Matthew 17:18 NIV). And it is right after this incident that Jesus says to His disciples, ***"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you"*** (Matthew 17:20-21 NIV).

I want you to notice what this unnamed man did when he had very little faith.

First of all, he was very honest with Jesus about his doubts, his lack of faith. He said, *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* Or, in other words, *“I do have some faith; but listen, Jesus, I also have a lot of doubts. Help me overcome my doubts.”*

He was just blatantly honest with our Lord. *Don't you imagine that when he told his family and friends that he was going to go to Jesus and ask for His help on behalf of his son that they must have said to him, “Now don't say anything about your doubts. Don't let Him know that you have serious questions about whether He can really help you or not. Just tell that Man what He wants to hear. Pretend that you have*

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more faith than you really do. Don't let people know that you don't have much faith in all of this.”

But this man was too honest to do that. He wasn't going to pretend that he had something he didn't have. In the midst of all of these religious people, he said, *“I have some faith...but not enough. Help me overcome my doubts.”*

And Jesus always responds to an honest seeker. Always! While He is dying on the cross, while people are mocking Him and ridiculing Him and jeering Him, a criminal, a deeply sinful man, says to Him, *“Remember me when you come into your kingdom,”* and Jesus responds, *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”* (Luke 23:42-43 NIV). Jesus always responds to an honest seeker.

He says in one place, *“Whoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (John 6:37 ESV).

This guy had a lot of doubts. He lacked faith. He had brought his son to the disciples, to the church, to Christian believers, and they had prayed over him and tried to help him but it hadn't worked. They had failed. His son was just as sick as when he had first

come. He had his doubts.

He said, *“Jesus, if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” I'm not sure what You can really do. Nothing has worked yet. I don't have a lot of faith here, Jesus, but if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*

Don't you love the way Jesus responds? He doesn't criticize this man for his lack of faith. He's not offended by his doubts. He doesn't become defensive and judgmental and preachy. He smiled (at least I think He smiled!), challenged him a bit, and said, *“If you can?”*

Do you know who you're talking to here? I'm the One whom the Father has sent to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed. I'm the One who is able to do immeasurably more than all you ask or imagine. “If you can? Everything is possible for him who believes.”

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Jesus responds to his honesty. He meets him at the point of his need. He says, in essence, *“Well, that's not a lot of faith, but I'm the Master at taking something that's small and making it mighty.”*

One day He took a little boy's lunch of 5 little loaves of bread and 2 small fish and somehow increased it and multiplied it and grew it until it was enough to feed a multitude of 5000 people. Another time at a wedding feast when an embarrassed host had run out of wine, Jesus took water and blessed it and somehow turned that water into wine.

And on this occasion, He took what little faith this man had, blessed it, used it, grew it, and did mighty miracle of healing. The disciples must have been amazed. They were probably thinking in their minds, *“But this guy didn't have a lot of faith, Jesus. How could You answer this prayer? He had doubts. He had questions. He lacked so much!”*

Jesus knew what they were thinking and so He says to them in essence, *“Nah, nah, you don't really understand My power nor the nature of faith and prayer. You don't need a lot of faith to move a*

mountain. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

But, you see, it all begins with being honest and transparent before the Lord. Whatever we put into God's hands, He blesses. But what He can't bless, what He doesn't bless, are those things that we try to hide from Him, those things we aren't willing to let go of, those things we try to keep from Him.

This man was just so honest with his doubts, his lack of faith, his spiritual need. He says, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* And I believe Jesus did.

What do you do if you don't have much faith? Well, the first thing you do is just be honest with God. Don't hide it. Don't fake it. Don't pretend to have something you don't have. Just be honest with God.

Now here's the second thing this guy did – he believed his beliefs and doubted his doubts. Instead of dwelling on what he didn't

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believe...instead of cuddling and coddling his questions, his uncertainties...instead of allowing his doubts to keep Him from Christ...he fed his faith and he starved his doubts.

Now a lot of people do just the opposite. They believe their doubts and doubt their beliefs. They allow some nagging question, some deep-seated cynicism, some intellectual obstacle or impediment keep them from Christ.

- **Maybe it's a question about the accuracy and the authority of Scripture.**
- **Maybe it's some tension between science and faith.**
- **Maybe it's the incongruity between what Christians say and what Christians do.**
- **Maybe it's a genuine disillusionment with organized religion and the church.**

But instead of focusing upon and nurturing and living by what they do believe in, they concentrate upon and cleave to and magnify what they can't understand or accept or believe in. They believe their doubts and doubt their beliefs.

Please listen to me this morning. Every Christian believer has questions that trouble them. Every Christian believer has what I would call *"chasms of doubt."*

One of the great Christian writers of our day who has influenced and impacted my life is **Charles Swindoll**. Perhaps you have read some of his books – *Improving Your Serve, Grace Awakening, Strike The Original Match, Living On The Ragged Edge, Come Before Winter*. He is currently the president of **Dallas Theological Seminary**, as well as the Senior Pastor of a thriving church which he planted near Dallas.

I believe he is one of the true Christian leaders of our day. Let me open a little window into his life and faith. Actually, he opens it himself and these are his exact words.

When my father died at the age of eighty-seven, he had lived with us for four years before we found it necessary to admit him to a very fine, clean place where he lived a while longer. He was

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kept under the watchful care of my sister and me during his final days in the hospital. I grieved silently. Yet when it came to my duties as a pastor of a growing, dynamic church, it was like someone threw a switch and I pressed on in my responsibilities.

I preached Dad's funeral to a small gathering of family and friends. I spoke somberly and appropriately about the promises of God and the hope we have beyond the grave. I buried my father's frail body with grace and poise, as all good ministers do. I never missed a beat. I've done that duty hundreds of times throughout my many years in the ministry. I could do much of it with my eyes closed ... but always with tenderness and compassion.

My sister, Luci, and I got back on the plane to return home. During a quiet moment she asked, "Babe, do you believe every single thing you said today?" It made me think...deeply.

"No," I said, almost sighing under my breath. "There are

things that the jury's still out on in my mind."

"That's not what I'm asking," she said back to me gently. "I know you believe a lot of it. I just want to know if you fully believe every single thing. 'Cause if you do, we're very different."

I said, "No. There are things that I really have a hard time believing and understanding. I just can't fit everything together in my mind and in my heart." She paused, then lovingly put her hand on my arm and with tears in her eyes answered, "That's good, Babe. And that's okay." Perhaps softened by her tender expression of love and honesty, I looked at the clouds outside the window as tears began to flow for my dad and for our losing him.

He goes on to say,

Do you feel the freedom to admit, "I just don't know for sure?" Is there a place for you because you're still thinking and still questioning? Bottom line: Is it okay to doubt? It's okay! In fact, it is necessary! You must or you won't grow. You'll wind up learning someone else's answers, and in many cases they will be inadequate for your questions...if you're honest enough to ask them.

You see, here's the question: *Are you going to live by what you believe in* (even though you may have some questions that are just unanswered), *or are you*

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going to allow those questions and uncertainties that you have to completely obliterate what you do believe in and keep you from the work and ministry and healing power of Jesus?

This guy in the Bible believed his beliefs and doubted his doubts. He fed his faith and allowed Jesus to dispel his doubts. He said, **"If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."** *I don't know what you can do but I believe you can do something. "I do believe."* *I have some faith in this heart of mind. "Help me overcome my unbelief."*

Now that's the third thing this guy did – he asked Jesus to help him overcome his lack of faith. He brought his

questions, his doubts, his uncertainties to Jesus. He prayed, **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."** You may want to underline in your Bible these two words - **"help me."**

He wasn't willing to just slosh around in this quagmire of unbelief and confusion. Yes, others had failed him. He had brought his son to Jesus' disciples and they weren't able to do a thing for them. But he wasn't willing to let a string of disappointments destroy what little faith he did have. And so he says to Jesus, **"Help me overcome my unbelief."**

And the bottom line is—Jesus did! He took what little faith this man had and grew it and blessed it and honored it. Jesus took that sick boy by the hand, lifted him, **"and he was healed from that moment,"** says Scripture.

Here's what I want you to go home with this morning. You don't have to have a lot of faith to find help and healing with Jesus. If you don't have much faith, don't be discouraged, don't give up, don't turn away, don't quit praying. Jesus says, **"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."**

Be very honest with Jesus about your lack of faith. Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts. And ask Jesus to help you overcome

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your lack of faith.

I love that story about a woman who was known for her great faith. It seemed that God answered so many of her prayers. One day a man who had a great need came to this woman's house to ask her to intercede for his need.

He knocked on her front door and when she came to the door, he asked, **"Are you that woman with the great faith?"**

She said, ***“No. I’m that woman with a little faith in a great God.”***

Please be encouraged today with these words from Jesus. ***“I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you”*** (Matthew 17:20-21 NIV).