

# Faith and Works XXVII

*The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts*

Col. 2:8

# Prayer and Fasting

**Mark 9:14-29** 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 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 mute 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.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

This is one of those places in scripture where the marketers of commercial religious teachings jump in with offers for a ten step program to increase, build and grow faith through prayer and fasting. And yet, if faith can be as a mustard seed, how big should or does it need to grow? What were the methods that Jesus seemed to be suggesting and why?

We can see where the disciples were looking to their own ability, seeking to understand what they themselves lacked when they said "Why couldn't we drive it out?" All too often when engaged in the Lord's work, we can begin to rely on ourselves and not God for the strength to do the work to which He has called us. The disciples were to be operating in the authority of Jesus, by faith in His name and who He is.

Notice the sentence, "if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus then replies " 'If you can'? Everything is possible for him who believes." The object of the belief was to be in Jesus and His ability to do what the father had asked.

**Corinthians 1:20** For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.

Keeping our eyes off ourselves and staying in a state of dependence and reliance on Christ can be challenging as the world continually seeks to confront us based on our measure of abilities.

Some Greek manuscripts have the words "and fasting" added to the last verse above, while some do not. While those words may or may not have been included in the original document, yet the meaning, if understood in the traditional New Testament sense, remains the same.

Today many teach fasting as a way to increase spiritual power or to become more righteous before God, yet in the Biblical sense, fasting does not increase our power, it allows us to be more aware of His.

Paul's ministry, as powerful as it was, came at the cost of his reliance on himself.

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10** And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

And again in Psalms we read:

**Psalms 118:14** The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.

Likewise prayer is not a way to increase personal power, it is casting our cares on Him, with God as our source who we are to approach clothed in the likeness not of

ourselves, but in the very life of His Son. While many religions define prayer as meditation of as an exercise to increase ones spiritual power, the Bible defines prayer as God's children communicating with Him as the object.

**1 John 5:14** Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

**Luke 11:9-13** "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

What then was the faith, and what was the faith in, that Jesus was talking about? Faith is like the word "chance". Atheists like to say that the universe was created by "chance". Yet that is the same thing as saying the universe was created by nothing, which explains nothing. For chance has no ontological existence, it is simply a statistic of probability, in other words, it is not something that exists in itself that can by itself cause anything to happen. Faith, as Jesus taught it, is like that. It is faith in its object that brings the results Jesus spoke of. One can have faith as a mustard seed, for faith is not an object. Faith in itself is not to be measured as if it had its own substance.

**Luke 17:5-6** The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

It is the object of faith that is of importance. Faith must have an object, faith is not an object in itself. In the New Testament, the object of faith is Jesus, in who He is, in our being crucified and risen with Him, in His authority at the right hand of the Father and whose authority he gives to us when we are not in ourselves, but in Him, when we completely trust in Jesus as our foundation for all that we know ourselves to be.

An example of this New Testament principle is when Peter walked on the water.

**Matthew 14:22-33** Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary.

Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid."

And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were

in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Notice Peter's faith was not that he could walk on water, but on who had commanded him when he said "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

Another example of how the object of Biblical faith is Jesus is in the account of the centurion.

**Matthew 8:5-13** When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

The centurion's faith was in the authority of Jesus, not merely that people could be supernaturally healed.

It was faith in who Jesus was that determined whether miracles would take place.

In Jesus' own country He tried to present His message, yet because they were familiar with His human birth and upbringing among them, they could not bring themselves to believe His testimony that He was the Christ, the Lamb of God.

**Matthew 13:54-58** When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?" So they were offended at Him.

But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

The unbelief spoken of here is not whether or not they believed in miracles, but what they believed about Jesus.

In Acts, miracles were always seen as confirmation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Acts chapter 3 Peter heals a lame man, not by faith in healing, but by faith in Jesus, for he speaks of "the faith which comes through Him."

**Acts 3:11-16** Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made

this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. **And His name, through faith in His name**, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.

This has always been the problem with the modern view that Jesus is our example to teach us how to do the works He did. The miracles were to point to Him, to testify to who He is that all may come to faith in Him.

**John 10:22-25** Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me.

While many search the scriptures and follow the latest new teaching that promises spiritual power, we should remember what Jesus said to those seeking such things.

**John 6:28-29** Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

For true faith, Jesus must be where our attention is, not our own faith or abilities.

**Hebrews 12:2** looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

**Col. 3: 1-3** If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

There is a reliance on Him that is necessary for us to be able to walk in His authority, and not our own.

**John 15: 1-17** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but

I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another."

Amen