

Strengthens  
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Mark 9:17-29

Sometimes in life you get stretched. Sometimes you NEED some stretching. [illustration: My experience at the Stretch Zone.] Physical fitness requires some stretching.

You can look at me and know I'm not a body builder (and the same could be said of others 😊) but we all understand the concept of weight training. Our muscles are strengthened by exertion and resistance that causes micro tears in the muscle fibers. As those micro tears heal back the muscle becomes stronger. The key to growing muscle tone and strength is to lift to our limit and keep adding more weight to increase that muscle strength.

Growing our trust in God is like that. He allows us to be stretched by trials and circumstances so we will learn to trust Him more and more. Today's text records another encounter of a parent seeking Jesus' supernatural solution to an urgent problem. A couple of weeks ago it was a Gentile mother with a demon possessed daughter. Her faith was so strong that Jesus pronounced it "great!" (Mt. 15:28). We said the woman displayed both desperation from her situation and dependence on Jesus. In today's text, a father with a demon possessed son also showed desperation and dependence, but it was mixed with a little doubt. That's a lesson for us because most of the time we are more like this doubtful dad asking Jesus for more faith.

The point: Our faith in God, like a muscle, grows through exertion and resistance. Our faith in God is also a gift He gives us. He calls on us to exercise that gift (Mt. 17:20) and to turn to Him to "increase our faith!" (Lk. 17:5)<sup>i</sup>

The scene is a crowded street. Jesus had just come down from a mountain with Peter, James, and John where He was transfigured before their eyes, and they literally heard the Heavenly Father's voice. Coming down from that mountaintop experience they were right back to the stress of ministry as they walked up on an argument. The other nine disciples had tried and failed to exorcise a demon from a boy. In recent days they had been successful using the healing power Jesus had given them (Mt. 10:1), but this time they failed, and the crowd was worked up. Jesus asked, "What is all this arguing about?"

**Mark 9:17–29 (ESV)** —**17** And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. **18** And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." **19** And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." **20** And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. **21** And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. **22** And it has often cast

him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” **23** And Jesus said to him, “ ‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” **24** Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” **25** And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” **26** And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” **27** But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. **28** And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” **29** And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

- Mark gave lots of detail about this tragic situation. We should pause and put ourselves in this father’s sandals. Imagine if this was your child or grandchild. Imagine the stress!
- Verse 19: Jesus’ response might catch us off guard. *“You faithless people! How long must I put up with you?”*<sup>iii</sup> Don’t you love it when Jesus’ human side spills out? He was both God and man and, in His humanness, He too could be exasperated. It appears He was not only frustrated with the lack of faith among this group but in all of Israel.
- When they brought the boy near Jesus, the demon’s panic was evident in such close proximity to God’s Son. That’s because evil and righteousness cannot co-exist.
- Jesus asked the boy’s father for the specifics of his tragic situation. Given Jesus’ omniscience we can assume He wanted the crowd to hear the extent of the suffering.
- Verse 22: The dad’s words displayed his desperation mixed with doubt. *“Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.”*
- Imagine Jesus’ tone of voice in His reply. The NLT: *“What do you mean, ‘If I can?’”*
- Do you think Jesus ever asks us that question when we come seeking His power and doubt creeps into our prayers?
- Jesus told the Father what He says to us: *“Anything is possible if a person believes.”*
- How has that verse been taken out of context by “name it and claim it” word of faith teaching? Why doesn’t God give us exactly what we ask for in every circumstance?
- Jesus is not a genie. He said, *“All things are possible”* but He didn’t say *“Your wish is my command.”* Faith in God is believing He can do ANYTHING but trusting Him to do the BEST thing because He knows more than we do about EVERYTHING.
- Verse 24: The dad replied, *“I DO believe; but help me overcome my unbelief!”*
- Hearing these words we can really relate to this desperate dad as he came clean with Jesus about his mixture of faith and doubt.
- We talk about “childlike faith” because little children find it easy to trust. They have no choice but to trust because they are totally dependent on those who care for them.
- As we grow into adulthood, we feel less dependent and buy into the myth that WE are in control. As a result we’ve learned to lower our expectations as a defense mechanism. We brace for the worst case scenario so we won’t be as disappointed if it comes.
- Faith is not about expecting the worst; it’s about trusting God for His best.
- This dad didn’t say, *“I’m not sure I can trust you, Jesus.”* He said, *“I DO believe, but my faith NEEDS HELP!”* How do you think God feels when we get this vulnerable with Him?

- If you ever feel a little guilty asking for God’s help growing your faith muscles, think about the apostles in **Luke 17:5–6 (ESV)** — **5** The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” **6** And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.
- Why do you think Jesus used the tiny mustard seed to describe the faith we must have?
- Verse 25: Jesus did exactly what the dad requested. He commanded the evil spirit to “come out of the boy and never enter him again!” The dad and his son received the miraculous healing that only the power of God could deliver.
- The disciples were no doubt looking down at their feet as they pondered their failure.
- Later they asked, “*Jesus, we cast out other evil spirits, why was this time different?*”
- Mark records that Jesus replied: “*This kind can be cast out only by prayer.*”
- Matthew’s account tells us: <sup>20</sup> He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.
- Perhaps they had grown overconfident because of their recent success in deploying the healing power Jesus gave them. Clearly, “little faith” and lack of prayer played a role.
- Again, using the mustard seed illustration, Jesus was saying, “*Bring me your flabby faith and I will grow it. The more you trust me the stronger it will grow.*”

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- In Hebrews 11 we see the biblical definition of faith in God:

**Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)** — **1** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. [My paraphrase: Faith in God assures me He will do what’s best for me even if I can’t see how He will do it.] Then verse six tells us, **6** And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. [No paraphrase needed; those words are plain. There is no relationship with God unless we trust Him to do what’s best for us.]

- Faith in God like a muscle, and it grows through exertion and resistance.
- Faith is also a gift from God.
- He calls on us to exercise that gift and to ask Him to “increase our faith” when needed.
- As I thought about this concept, I thought of a couple of titles we might give this lesson:
  - *Growing our Faith in the Gym with Jesus.*
  - *Spiritual Stretching for More Strength from the Savior.*
- Here’s a final illustration to help us remember what this dad’s request teaches us.
- Think of growing our faith in God like bench pressing weights to grow muscles.
- What does a “spotter” do for someone who is bench pressing weights? Why is a spotter not only a good idea but a necessity when lifting maximum weight on a bench?
- Think of Jesus as our “spotter” as we lift the weight of our life to grow our faith in Him.
- Like any good “spotter” Jesus doesn’t hover but He’s never far away.
- If the weight becomes too much, we BELIEVE He will step in as only He can do.
- Think of Jesus also as our “trainer” and “sustainer.”

- He not only stands by to help us lift the load of our circumstances if needed, but like any good trainer, He adds weight to the bar so the muscles of our faith grow stronger.
- Don't say, "God won't give you more than you can bear." He WILL because that's how we grow our faith muscles. What He won't do is let that weight crush us if we need help.
- The dad with the demon-possessed boy was desperately struggling with the weight of his circumstances. At the moment he had "maxed out" he cried to Jesus for help.
- There are many examples in scripture of trusting God when things seemed impossible.
- One of the best is Abraham. When Abraham and his wife were way beyond child-bearing age God promised them a son and a nation! Sarah laughed, but Abraham trusted.
- Paul wrote about Abraham's faith in Romans 4:20:

<sup>20</sup> No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.<sup>iii</sup>

- This is how it works in the gym with Jesus.
- We come with our tiny mustard seed-sized, flabby faith and we lift the bar of life.
- We come with belief that He is able to do and desires to do what is best for us.
- We come with the vulnerability to say, "I believe but I need help with my unbelief!"
- Like any good spotter, Jesus won't allow us to be crushed by the weight of our circumstances. Like any good trainer, He will add enough weight to the bar of life so we can grow our flabby faith.
- Let's remember, when the weight of life seems too heavy, He will help us grow our faith.

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<sup>i</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Lk 17:5). (2016). Crossway Bibles.

<sup>ii</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Mk 9:19). Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Ro 4:20–21). (2016). Crossway Bibles.