**MISSION POSSIBLE**

**(Matthew 17:14-21)**

It began as a TV series that ran from 1966 to 1973. It went on the become a series of motion pictures. Between 1996 and 2018, six films of the franchise were released, all starring the same leading man.

In both the series and the movies, there is a crack team of agents who undertake dangerous and daring missions. They are known as the IMF. In the TV series, at the beginning of the episode, the team leader would receive a message ending with these words: “As always, should you or any of your IM force be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions . . . This tape will self-destruct in five seconds.” Five seconds later there would be a puff of smoke, and another exciting episode of *Mission Impossible* would ensue.

The initials IMF stood for Impossible Mission Force.

We who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ may feel like Jesus has given to us an impossible mission—to evangelize the entire world and make disciples from every people group before He returns. In today’s message, I want use our text to argue that our mission is entirely possible, and congregations that fail to undertake that mission, they are the ones who will self-destruct. Let’s look at our text and find out why our mission is possible.

Last week we saw how Jesus took three of His disciples on a field trip. He led them up a high mountain. On this trip, the text tells us that He was transfigured before them. He revealed to them the glory that belongs to Him in heaven. We are told that His face shone like the sun. In chapter 16, the previous chapter, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In last week’s text, God spoke from heaven and declared, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him” (16:5). This field trip involved an audio/visual lesson as to who Jesus is. The message they both heard and saw confirmed that Jesus was much more than just a Jewish Rabbi. He was the God of heaven who came to this world wrapped in human flesh.

Today, we are going to look at what happened as soon as Jesus, Peter, James, and John returned from their excursion. Let’s read our text—Matthew 17:14-20. To get a more detailed picture of the incident, let’s read Mark’s account of the same event (Mark 9:14-29).

1. **OUR MISSION IS POSSIBLE IF WE LIVE WHERE THE NEEDS REALLY ARE.**

If it had been up to the three disciples, they would have chosen to stay up on that mountain indefinitely with Jesus. That seems to be what Peter is implying when he offers to build three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Those two OT saints were seen talking with Jesus on that mountain, and the three disciples wanted to say right there.

Have you ever had a spiritual, mountaintop experience? It could have been at a youth camp like Falls Creek. It could have been a revival meeting where God came down. It could have been at a spiritual retreat.

I have had literal mountaintop experiences at various retreat centers in places like the Sangre de Cristo mountain range of New Mexico, the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Just outside of Santa Fe is Glorieta, which used to be owned by the Southern Baptist Convention. Just outside of Colorado Springs is Glenn Eyrie which is owned and operated by the Navigators. Just outside of Ashville, NC is the Cove, a retreat and training center operated by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

I would be content to live out the rest of my life at any of those places, up in the mountains, taking in the beauty of God’s creation, far from the pressures of daily life and the conflict and struggles that are found aplenty down the mountain where most people live.

As of yet, God hasn’t called me to live in the mountains. Right now, His call for me is to live on the plains. This is where the needs are. This is where He can use me.

Just like Jesus and the three disciples couldn’t stay on the mountain but had to go back down to face human need, we must return from our places of retreat to advance the cause of Christ where we live.

According to Mark’s account, the first thing Jesus and the three saw when they got back was the rest of the disciples surrounded by a large crowd arguing with religious leaders. They went from a spiritual high down to religious bickering.

The next thing they saw was a mob of people coming towards Jesus, and then a distraught father explaining the terrible things that happens to his boy because he is possessed by a demonic spirit.

When they were up on the mountain, Moses and Elijah were calming talking with Jesus about some wonderful things. There was no arguing. There was not a multitude of people pressing in upon them. When they were up on the mountain, there were no distressed dads. There were no demon possessed children. There were no unclean spirits.

Wouldn’t you rather be on the mountaintop of religious experience rather than the valley of human need and misery?

* And isn’t that why we build privacy fences around our backyards?
* And isn’t that why we huddle in our homes with large flat-screen televisions and Netflix and all kinds of creature comforts?
* And isn’t that why we come to worship service on Sunday mornings and aren’t bothered by the absence of people we don’t know?

And isn’t that why we don’t get around to obeying Christ’s commands:

* to love our enemies,
* or to serve one another,
* or to feed the hungry,
* or to clothe the naked,
* or to visit the prisoner
* or to make disciples,
* or just about anything else that calls us to move from a place of comfort and security to live a life of service that is focused on meeting the needs of others?

It is time to come down from the mountain, to leave our house, to get out of the church building, and to spend time with those God brings our way. If we will do that, the mission God has for us will be possible.

1. **OUR MISSION IS POSSIBLE WHEN PEOPLE DON’T GIVE UP ON JESUS.**

Other than Jesus, of all the people in our story, the one I like best is the dad. He loved his boy. He wanted the best for his son. Somehow, he learned that here were nine of Jesus’ own disciples in the area. Rightly, he thought to himself, “Surely, they can help my son.”

They should have been able to do just that. We are told in Matthew 10:8 that before sending the 12 out on mission, Jesus said to them, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.” Jesus gave them the power to do those things. Mark 6:13 reports on their success in doing those things: “And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” The nine disciples who didn’t go up on the mountain were well-equipped to cast out the demonic spirit that possessed this boy and to completely heal him. Unfortunately, they failed. They were of no help at all. We will look at why later, but for right now, consider the dad who asks the disciples of Jesus to help, they try, and sadly the boy is still demon possessed. He is still mute. He is still afflicted with epileptic seizures.

To his credit, this dad did not lose faith in Jesus. When Jesus arrived, he still appealed to Jesus even though Jesus’ followers had failed him.

That doesn’t always happen today. In my experience, when the church fails people, instead of turning to Jesus, those people conclude that this buzz about Jesus is all hype, that Jesus has nothing to offer them.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but if you haven’t heard, let me tell you, “The Church of Jesus Christ doesn’t have a very good reputation in our world today. In fact, we have a pretty bad reputation.” We are viewed by those on the outside of the church as being hypocritical, anti-homosexual, too political, and judgmental. In short, the Christian church is seen as being and acting unchristian.

What are we going to have to do to change our poor reputation? Twelve years ago, a book came out entitled, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters.* Gabe Lyons wrote the last chapter in which he offered this counsel, “It comes down to this: we must become Christlike again.”

That really is it. We need to love the way Jesus loved. We need to accept people the way Jesus accepted them. We need to serve the way Jesus served. If we would do that, we could change the way the church is viewed, but it will take hard work, and it will take time.

At the very end of the book, some popular church leaders answered the question, “What will Christians be known for 30 years from now?” I like Rick Warren’s answer. He wrote:

My dream is that thirty years from now, the church will be known more by what it is *for* than what it is *against.* For some time now, the hands and feet of the body of Christ have been amputated, and we’ve been pretty much reduced to a big mouth. We talk far more than we do. It’s time to reattach the limbs and let the church be the church in the twenty-first century.

The response I like best was written by a Christian leader named Mike Foster. Listen to a portion of what he wrote:

There have been moments when I still wanted to believe in Jesus, but I didn’t want to belong to this crazy family anymore. Maybe you’ve been there, too . . . With all the sincerity I can muster, I truly believe this dysfunctional and whacked-out family of ours can be healed and find recovery.

I have faith that in the future we will make better decisions on what issues we think are important. When we stand up for something and draw a line in the sand, we will know that it is clearly for the cause of Christ and not for some political, religious, or self-serving agenda. We will pick the hills we die on more wisely and choose to go to battle a little less often. And when we stand up for something, we will take our two favorite companions: grace and love. They will stand on the left and right of us. And we would never be so foolish or unwise as to ever journey without them.

It has been said that we are known by the company we keep, and if we will make grace and love our traveling companions, I believe we will change the way the church is perceived in our culture.

And when we fail to meet the expectations that people have for us, including our own expectations, people will be less likely to give up on Jesus. And when people are still attracted to Jesus despite us, that will make the success of our mission far more likely.

1. **OUR MISSION IS MADE POSSIBLE SINCE JESUS WON’T GIVE UP ON**

**US.**

Jesus looked at the dad. He looked down at the boy. And then I think He looked over to the disciples who were hanging the heads in shame. I think he may have rolled His eyes, and shook His head. Then, He asked a rhetorical question. He didn’t really expect an answer. Look at v. 17.

Jesus was disappointed in the disciples. He knew they could have done better because He had empowered them to do the very thing that needed to be done. They had done it many times before. While Jesus was disappointed in them, He did not give up on them. I have mentioned before that Jesus had no plan B to reach the world. He put all of His eggs, so to speak, in the basket of the disciples.

In the last months, weeks, and days of His earthly ministry, the focus of Jesus was the disciples. From here on in, He spent far less time with the crowds and far much more time with His crew. Interestingly, of the ten post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, He shows Himself every time to His followers and particularly His apostles. They were His focus.

You and I are still His focus. That is why He has placed His Spirit within us. He promised He would never leave us. The last recorded words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel contain the promise from Jesus, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In recent weeks, I have told several John Ortberg stories. Here is another one from that author and preacher:

A few weeks ago, when I was out surfing, there was no one else in the water except for a huge guy practicing martial arts on the beach. After I’d been out a little while, a tiny wisp of a kid came paddling up out of nowhere. I couldn't believe he was out there by himself. He pulled his little board right up next to mine. He was so small he hardly needed a board. He could have stood up in the ocean on a Frisbee. He told me his name was Shane. He asked me how long I’d been surfing. I asked him how long he’d been surfing.

“Seven years,” he said. “How old are you?” I asked. “Eight.”

Then he said, “What I like about surfing is that it’s so peaceful. You meet a lot of nice people here.”

We talked a while longer. Then I asked him, “How did you get here, Shane?”

“My dad brought me,” he said. Then he turned around and waved at the nearly empty beach. The Goliath doing martial arts waved back.

“Hi, Son,” he called out.

Then I knew why Shane was so at home in the ocean. It wasn’t his size. It wasn’t his skill. It was who was sitting on the beach. His father was always watching. And his father was very big. Shane wasn’t really alone at all. Neither are we.

You and I have a big, Father God who is watching us. Sometimes we disappoint Him. Sometimes we disappoint ourselves, but God still loves us, and He still uses us to accomplish the mission He gave us. Our mission is possible.

1. **OUR MISSION IS POSSIBLE WHEN WE EMPLOY OUR FAITH IN THE LORD.**

After Jesus successfully healed the boy and cast out the demon, the disciples asked why they weren’t able to do that. Jesus answered them in v. 20.

Jesus said that His disciples lacked faith. And they didn’t need a lot a faith; just a little bit of faith would be enough. What did Jesus mean? The disciples were not doubting the Lord’s ability to work through them. He had done that often.

As far as I can tell, the problem was not the amount of faith the disciples had; it was the object of their faith. It appears to me they weren’t trusting Jesus; they were trusting in themselves.

Mark’s gospel says that the disciples were arguing with the scribes. One preacher suggested that the critical Pharisees recognize the disciples. They look around and don’t see Jesus. They approach the disciples and ask where Jesus is. They say, “He’s not here right now.” The Pharisees point out the boy and say, “Well, if your teacher were here, he’d probably heal that boy. Too bad, you can’t do what He can do.”

The disciples get a bit indignant and say, “Well, we can heal him, too.” They call the father and the boy over, and they trust in their ability to get the job done. Only, nothing is happening. The scribes start making fun of the disciples, and the disciples start arguing with the scribes, and that is when Jesus shows up.

I don’t know if it happened that way or not, but I do think the disciples were trusting their experience and their abilities rather than entrusting this boy into God’s care.

When we serve God in the flesh, He will not bless that service, and He can’t use us to accomplish His purposes.

Our faith needs to be in Him not in us. We don’t need a great deal of faith; we just need a little faith in our great God, and He will enable us to do mighty things.

Let me tell you about a small congregation nestled in the foothills of the Great Smokie Mountains. This congregation built a new sanctuary on a piece of land that had been willed to them by a church member. Just ten days before the congregation was to open, the local building inspector came by and looked things over. He informed the pastor that the parking lot of the church was too small for the size building they had built. He told him that until the church doubled their parking lot, they would not be allowed to use their new sanctuary.

This posed a problem because the only additional land they had was the mountain against which the new building had been built. They would have to move the mountain or at least a good chunk of it out of their backyard.

The next Sunday morning, the pastor explained the problem and invited all those who had mountain moving faith to meet with him that night in a prayer session in which they would ask God to move the mountain from behind them and to give them the money to have it paved and painted before the dedication which was scheduled for the very next Sunday.

That evening, 24 of the church’s 300 members showed up for the prayer meeting. They prayed for three hours until the pastor said the final, “Amen.” The pastor announced, “We’ll open next Sunday as scheduled. God has never let us down before, and I believe He will be faithful this time, too.”

In the morning, while the pastor was in his study, he heard a knock at the door. After calling, “Come in,” a construction foreman opened the door, and removed his hard hat as he entered. He said, “Excuse me, Reverend. I’m from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We’re building a huge shopping mall over there, and we need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church? We’ll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can’t do anything until we get dirt in and allow it to settle properly.”

Next Sunday, the church dedicated their new sanctuary as planned.

Would you have been at that prayer meeting? Would have trusted God to come through? God has given us a mission, and that mission is possible when we trust Him.