

Myth #2: Faith Can Accomplish Anything

The second in the series: *Urban Myths: Debunking Christian Clichés*

May 22 & 23, 2010

Intro:

It was cool to see so many Dayspring volunteers all around town this weekend for the Iris Festival. Thanks for serving. We've had some *pretty severe weather* this spring so I worried about the rain ruining the parade, but *Oregonians are waterproof!* While the rain has been hard at times, and the wind has been pretty destructive, even dropping a few trees, I was intrigued this week by the news coverage of the *30-year anniversary of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens*. Talk about severe weather and trees falling! Back then, it *wasn't just hail* falling from the sky. *Rocks came down!*

A man named Harry Truman, *caretaker of the lodge at Spirit Lake*, became a celebrity for *being unwilling to evacuate when the eruption seemed imminent*. Scientists were warning him about what was to come but *he didn't believe them*. *He was sure* he would be fine. He shared his theory in school assemblies, even here in Keizer, and on national TV. It turns out that *he believed something that wasn't true*. And *his faith didn't save him*. His lodge was hit by a *150' high wall of rock moving at 100 mph*. He was buried so deep that authorities couldn't recover his body.

Poor Harry provides a powerful example of the danger of *believing something that isn't true*. Being *sincere* in your beliefs isn't enough. You can be *sincerely wrong!*

Last week I introduced our new series of messages. We're *exploring some classic urban myths*. We talked about the risk inherent in *following your heart*. Today we will be addressing a second myth, that *faith can accomplish anything*. This phrase is a **close miss**: It is a *pretty good* saying. *It isn't far off*. But, as we'll see, it is but *one more Christian cliché*.

1. The phrase, *faith can accomplish anything* is not true, but it is close.

Let's talk about faith, starting with a biblical definition found in **Heb 11:1** - faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith is a confident trust in something real that is not yet visible.

Now, when I say that the phrase, *faith can accomplish anything* is not true, don't misunderstand me, faith is important, in fact, it is necessary. Without it we can't please God (**Heb 11:6**). By it we are justified (**Rom 3:28**). Faith is needed in prayer (**James 1:5-8**). Faith is vital for Christian living: **2 Cor 5:7** - we're to walk by faith and not by sight. So, in this message, I certainly won't disparage faith, but I will say that *it is only as good as it's object*. That is its limitation. Would you place your faith in a **broken chair**? Don't. It will let you down. It won't support you, and a false philosophy won't hold you up either. You can be absolutely sure your faith - *in and of itself* - will sustain you, but sincerity is insufficient. *Faith shouldn't be in and of itself!*

The phrase, *faith can accomplish anything* is close to being true. But *almost true* is not good enough. Think of football: If the kick was *close to being a field goal*, that means the kicker *missed*. If the receiver *almost caught the ball*, it was *incomplete*. And if the offensive drive *stopped just short of a touchdown*, you *don't get points*. Being *close to being right* is to be *wrong*. And being wrong can be scary if we are talking about your physical or spiritual safety and security.

I'm not saying that there is *no benefit in positive thinking*. It does have *some* power, but it isn't *all-powerful*. I don't see faith accomplishing everything I'd like to like it to produce. Miracles, by definition, are unusual. We pray with faith and some people who are sick get worse. Some die. Let's be honest, at times, the result is the opposite of our request.

The evidence that *faith doesn't always produce what we want* is not only abundant in our modern world, but the same was true in Bible days. At times, God used Paul to bring healing to the hurting (**Acts 28:8**), but he could not be

healed from his own ailment (2 Cor 12:7-10). In 1 Tim 5:23 he advised Timothy to take wine for his stomach problems. Why didn't Paul heal his beloved friend? The same could be said about Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25-27). In 2 Tim 4:20 we read that they left Trophimus sick at Miletus. Apparently, God doesn't heal at man's command. While he can and does heal, it has more to do with *his will* than *ours*. And the fact is: *we don't always get what we want*.

Look at Heb 11, known as the Bible's Hall of Faith. It is a list of heroes who accomplished great things by faith. *By faith this guy did this and that guy did that*. Reading it makes one think that *faith can accomplish anything*. But the author *didn't quit* when he was ahead. He went on to list people who *didn't get* what they asked for. Heb 11:35-40 - *Others were tortured... Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised...* Some might say that their faith didn't work for them. Or maybe we shouldn't view faith as a way to get what we want.

When our *expectations are inaccurate*, they will be *unmet*. *Disappointment will turn to disillusionment*. *If we buy into the myth that faith can accomplish anything*, then our shattered hopes will cause us to question why God let us down.

Prov 13:12 – Hope deferred makes the heart sick.

I asked a friend what she thought of the phrase, *faith can accomplish anything*. She said, *That would mean that I could accomplish anything. And if something that you desperately don't want to happen happens, then where are you? You'd fault God and worry that you didn't have enough faith*. The thought

that *faith can accomplish anything* is a myth, and a dangerous one. It leads to either blaming yourself or God or both. T - Now, there is a key to why this phrase doesn't work.

The phrase fails due to **a sad substitution:**

2. The problem with the phrase is that it

substitutes faith for God. The power is in God, not in the faith. If you say that same phrase but replace the word *faith* with *God*, then you are stating a profound truth. God *can* accomplish anything. In Gen 18:14, God asks, is anything too difficult for me? Jesus said, Mt. 19:26 - with God all things are possible; Paul wrote, Eph 3:20 God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...

Remember the chair illustration? When *God* is the object of our faith, we are secure. You can place your life in him. There is power in the prayer of faith, but only because of its recipient! Prayer to the ceiling wouldn't do you any good.

The mistake is when people place *faith in faith*. This practice *dethrones God and elevates self*. I heard someone saying, *I don't just have faith that God can do what I ask, but that he will!* I remember thinking: *What if God has different ideas?* When we are demanding, disappointment sets in.

On TV you'll hear that we are guaranteed to *get our way*. One televangelist said, *You are in control! God has to be given permission. All we have to do is to make a positive confession and God is obligated to obey.* Must God *perform according to our demands?* Does God have to *follow the rules?* With that thinking, you've got to ask, *wait, who is Lord?* Isn't it Jesus? This is *role reversal* - a substitution you don't want to make. You *don't want to substitute anything for God*, especially self-will. It denies his sovereign authority.

We can't *manipulate* God. We're not in a position to *demand* that he *meets our expectations* and *recognizes our rights*. We don't deserve to have things our way. In fact, we

don't even know what is best for us. We're inclined to whine for the wrong things. *Cereal!* What we think of as best may not be! God can see the big picture and we can't.

Faith in faith is ultimately futile. Our faith must be in God, and that means we are not in charge. He is Lord and nothing can substitute for him.

T - Having cleared away some confusion, we need to think again about faith and prayer and explain **the way it works:**

3. God can accomplish anything, but he may not do what we want when we want it. Because he's God, omnipotent, and autonomous. He's in control. His will prevails over ours. Job prayed in [42:2 - I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.](#) Ps 115:3 - [Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.](#) He can do whatever he wants to do. So the question is: *what does he want to do?* The Scriptures' answer is that God wants to do something inside of us, and that takes time. Getting things right away does not develop character. God's goal is not to produce spoiled brats, but obedient, loving, well-adjusted, productive children. God wants us to trust him even before we see any evidence he's at work.

We don't like waiting. We expect *instantaneous answers*. We think we can use a prayer of faith as an *incantation* or *magic formula* to get instant results. But God's doesn't operate according to our schedule. He's unlikely to jump up and meet our every demand. God's timing is considerably different from ours. [2 Pet. 3:9 - But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.](#) What this means is that *delays are not necessarily denials*. As we look back we can sometimes see God's wisdom in not giving us *what* we wanted *when* we wanted it. Or at all!

People say, *God didn't answer*, meaning they didn't get what they wanted. But God's *repertoire of possible answers*

includes *no*. That's an answer too. Let's look at an example of a man who didn't get what he asked for: [2 Cor. 12:7-10](#). Paul presented *his way* but came to accept *God's way*. Paul had faith, but God had other ideas about what was in Paul's best interest. He didn't receive physical healing, what he did receive was the grace to make it. Paul's *problem wasn't eliminated*; but his attention was redirected. *He didn't get what he wanted, but he came to want what he got.*

God loves us too much to answer all our requests *our way*. It's nice to know that when we in ignorance want something which is not best for us that God in love will respond by strengthening us to carry on with the thorn still embedded. Apparently God isn't as committed to our comfort as we are. He's about changing us to conform to his will. People say *prayer changes things*. More accurately, *God changes things*. Through prayer, God can choose to change what happens, and/or he can change our hearts.

How does it all work? Prayer isn't a means of getting our way by bending God's arm behind his back. It's not about *delivering our shopping list to our heavenly helper* and *imposing our will* on his but *becoming aligned with his will*.

T - This leads to... **Our part in the plan:**

4. We are to demonstrate our confident trust through submission in prayer and obedience.

We're to *have faith* in God, not to place *faith in faith!* And our faith should lead us to humble prayer and it should show in our *obedience*. [James 2:17 - faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.](#) True faith works. If it doesn't affect what we actually do, we're just kidding ourselves. Our *doing* proves the reality of our *believing*.

But back to prayer: *prayer itself is an act of faith*. What I've been saying in this message is that God answers our prayers are *according to his will*, not always *according to ours*. Jesus set the pattern of prayer for us by saying, [Not my](#)

will, but yours be done (Luke 22:42). That submission serves as our example. He relinquished it all to the Father. He laid down his life. Our Father knows best, so we'd do well to not insist on *our way*. God is not obligated to acquiesce to our demands. God has the right to do what he will, according to his will, and according to his timetable. He is not constrained by our ideas of how things should be.

I was recently singing a praise song about God's might. It includes the lyric: "*He can move the mountains.*" We sure saw this with Mt. St. Helens - *God can move mountains* - but *we don't see it often*. I guess he wants most mountains to stay put. Even some of the mountains in our way that we'd like him to flatten out.

Have you been disappointed with God? Does it seem like he's let you down? I challenge you today to trust him again. Place your faith firmly in God himself. Trust his will and his timing. He is not a means to our ends. He doesn't exist for us; we exist for him. He is God and we are not. He will not subordinate himself to us. We must submit to him!

More Meat: random thoughts, great cross references and some more of my half-baked ideas.

The real power is not in our spoken word, but in God's Word.

Many techniques of the religious showmen on TV seem to have more in common with psychics, shamans, and even occultists. So does some of the doctrine. Healthy skepticism is uncommon. Instead, a hunger for the miraculous leaves viewers open to being swept away by dangerous charlatans. We can't be undiscerning, willing to believe almost anything.

Teachers are parading around in a way that leads their followers to believe that healing is to be expected, claimed by all as a right. They put on sensational shows. But their activities fail to produce lasting results. People who jumped out of wheel chairs need them again when they leave the studios. The miraculously healed deaf reinstall their hearing aids when they leave. The power of suggestion has worn off and the optimistic attitude leaves with the temporary suspension of the symptoms. If people had the power to heal, why would they perform only on the tent meeting circuit? Why wouldn't they go into the cancer wards, the asylums, the AIDS hospice, and funerals.

What are our desires? Just what are we after? Spiritual growth? Maturity. But how do we achieve it? Through ecstatic experiences? Miraculous works, mystical signs, supernatural wonders? If so, we'll end up underemphasizing the normal means of spiritual growth: prayer, Bible teaching and study, obedience, service and fellowship.

Miracles occurred to authenticate messengers and substantiate their message.

1 Kings 17:23 - Elijah healed a boy and presented him to the mother, who then said, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." Jn 10:25 - "The works I do bear witness of Me." Acts 2:22 Jesus was shown to be who he was by his miracles and wonders. 14:3 - The Lord was bearing witness to the word by granting signs and wonders. 2 Cor. 12:12 - defending his apostleship - "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you... by signs and wonders and miracles." Heb. 2:3,4 - God bore witness to the apostles' teaching of the gospel by signs and wonders.

General biblical grouping of the miracles like healing also show a divine purpose beyond the comfort of those who are blessed. Most happened during three basic periods of history. Moses/Joshua, Elijah/Elijah, and Jesus/Apostles. New eras of revelation.

Unique role for the Apostles: Miracles were performed by the Apostles or people commissioned by the Apostles. Eph 2:20 - church was built upon their foundation. 1 Cor 9:1 - had to be eyewitnesses of the res. Christ. Even they were limited. They didn't boss God around.

I can think of three problems with believing that God will do your will:

1. This view is contradicted in real life.
2. This view is contradicted in the Bible.
3. This view demotes God and elevates self.

Faith is impotent to accomplish your will. God is omnipotent to accomplish his will.

People say, "God did this or he said that." We must test experience by Scriptural doctrine, not doctrine by experience! Dale Bruner - "The test of anything calling itself Christians not its significance or its success or its power, although these make the test more imperative. The test is truth."

Yet experiences are taken as self-validating! Ex: Being slain in Spirit - knocked flat? Was that God? Celebrities say so. With private messages from God, Scripture is ignored or only used to proof text these wild ideas. Can be preposterous, blasphemous. Guests on religious TV share absolutely anything and the ridiculous host nods and says, "Marvelous, this is great. Praise the Lord."

What does the on looking world think of Christians with the unsubstantiated claims and ludicrous extravagant tales from showmen? One said, "Jesus appears to me daily when I'm shaving." And you keep shaving?!?! What did Isaiah do? 6:5. Peter, Lk 5:8. John, Rev. 1. They fell on their faces before God. What a contrast to the frivolous, flippant, superficial Christianity on T.V.

People seek God's truth through the subjective means of intuition, not through external objective fact. A spiritual free-for-all takes place when we leave the Bible as the only means of receiving God's word. Pseudo-Christian mysticism.

What happens when people place their trust in extra biblical revelation? Pearl Of Great Price, Doctrines and Covenants, Science and Health, Watchtower magazine. Private revelations from God start cults, not revivals. Something more leads to something less.

God is in control and independent. Dan 4:35- He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand. Is 46:10,11 - My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. Fighting with God is futile. He is the almighty. 2 Chron. 20:6 - You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no-one can withstand you. He will not subordinate himself. What response is there but to bow? Put our face to the ground!!!

Some of America's best known televangelists subscribe either partly or wholly to what's commonly referred to as "positive confession," the "Word-Faith" teaching, or the "prosperity" doctrine. The teaching is that we have the right to exercise what they refer to as the "God-kind of faith" in calling things into existence and living in

prosperity and success as sovereign beings. The "Word-Faith" teaching is guilty of presenting an inflated view of man and a deflated view of God, thereby compromising God's message as revealed in the Bible. This reduces Jesus Christ to a means to an end. Style is one thing, but substance is something different. The church fails when it accommodates by compromising its message. We live in an age of self-indulgence and self-absorption. Christianity can engage this trend, but it must not acquiesce and engage in it.

Can a Christian lack the Spirit? Rom 8:9 - anyone without the Spirit doesn't have Christ. It's a package deal.

Do real Christians lack some second baptism? 1 Cor 12:13 - "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... Past tense - something all believers (even carnal ones) have experienced: must take place at salvation.

Are we missing something? Col. 2:10 - "In him you have been made complete..." 2 Pet. 1:3 - "through the true knowledge of him (Jesus)" I have been granted "everything pertaining to life and godliness."

What is true spirituality? What happens when the Spirit comes on a person? One TV guy: "A certain feeling in the abdomen, stiffening of the body, jumping, shouting, falling, sweating, fluttering of the eyelids." Does God produce frenetic, ecstatic, involuntary behavior? Agitation, or peace? Mysticism, or understanding? How about the fruit of the Spirit? It is much more useful!

Acts 17:11 - importance of examining the Scriptures to determine if things said are true.

Interesting thought: There is an antonymy between God's sovereignty and our choices. The "two wings of an airplane" illustration fails to grasp the significance of God's sovereignty in comparison to human free will.

Our freedom is not equal and opposite to God's sov. This would cause the fate of the world to fall into our hands. Even the wisest of us might pray for things that harm ourselves or others.

God doesn't need our prayers. He has no needs (Acts 17:25-27). His sovereignty is the bigger thing in which our freedom resides. We are in him. The question becomes, how tight are the seat belts?

My hope to get our attention off of ourselves and onto our God who can accomplish anything.

Prayer is not a way of making God's will subject to ours. In prayer we let go of ourselves and grasp God, yielding to His will.

We pray because we are commanded to pray. [1 Th 5:17 - pray continually!](#)

What was God doing with the healings that took place recorded in the Scriptures? Were they ends in themselves? If Jesus came primarily to heal, why did he do anything else?

The power of prayer goes far beyond the healthy psychological benefit of pouring out our feelings. Jesus said God answers [Matt 7:7,8 - Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.](#)

God carries out his will. And sometimes that conflicts with ours. Gordon MacDonald – *“I have begun to see that worship and intercession are for more the business of aligning myself with God’s purpose than asking him to align with mine.”*

Jesus said: [Matt 6:8](#) - **Your father knows what you need before you ask him.** His perfect knowledge fosters openness - nothing can shock Him - we can be totally honest. *Why pray* if He knows what’s best already? Can we enlighten God? He’s not going to say, *Thanks, your suggestion never even occurred to me.*

If God’s mind is already made up, then what difference can our prayers make? Can we change the mind of a God who has determined all things from eternity past? Will prayer alter His intentions? Or won’t he ultimately do what He wants, whether or not we pray? So, why pray? Prayer is no cruel guessing game where we keep asking for things until we stumble upon what He is going to do anyway. That view makes a mockery out of what Jesus said concerning prayer. [Mt 7:7,8](#). Think of it. Is Jesus reliable? He doesn’t call us to waste time in some pointless activity or ritual. He doesn’t want us to bang our heads against an impenetrable wall, he wants us to know, serve and enjoy our heavenly Father!

God *is* in control, yet he uses our prayers. Our finite minds cannot fathom how these truths can coexist. This is the paradox of prayer: I still don’t get it but I am going to do it because he allows it!

While we are commanded to pray, don’t think of prayer as an *obligation*, but an *opportunity*, a privilege! We’re invited to enter into his presence with confidence! [Heb 10:19ff.](#) How amazing and motivating! [Draw near!](#)

You can’t see what’s happening behind the scenes. Even though we don’t know what he’s doing, we don’t demand evidence, but open our eyes of faith to the invisible.

God works through providence all the time. But this is different from miracles. Providence = God’s supernatural control of things so that his plan is accomplished. Miracles = an event preformed which cannot be explained by natural forces.

God never said, “You can have it your way.” He said we could have it his way! Read the fine print concerning the conditions of answered prayer. We are to pray according to his will, not insist on ours. God is not obligated to acquiesce to our demands. We shouldn’t believe that we’ll always get what we want; but we can begin to want what we get.