



“Who took Matthew 17:21 out of the Bible?”

When you read through Matthew’s Gospel in an older translation (like the King James Version) every now and then you will find verses that you won’t find in the more up-to-date translations. Matthew 17:21 is one of those. (Matthew 18:10 and Acts 8:37 are a couple others).

Matthew records in chapter 17 of his Gospel (Good News about Jesus) an account of a man bringing his son to Jesus’ disciples to be healed of an unclean spirit that tormented the boy with seizures. The disciples couldn’t get rid of the spirit or heal the boy. Jesus arrived, rebuked the demon, it came out and the boy was instantly healed. Then we read:

19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

20 He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, 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.” [21] [a]

There’s nothing in v21 except a footnote.

It’s not difficult to find videos by folks on the internet (e.g. Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) who are indignant about this and who will tell you there’s some grand conspiracy to remove verses from the Bible. These videos claim that the omitted verses contain information the supposed conspirators don’t want us to know about or don’t like.

Sorry, but the real reason is not conspiratorial, and won’t likely get lots of “clicks” on any website or app. If you read the footnote at the bottom of the page it says:

“Some manuscripts insert verse 21: “But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.”

There are hundreds of ancient manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel. These manuscripts are all copies that are made, not by a copy machine, but hand-written manually by copyists. Most of the manuscripts do not include v21, but a few do.

It’s pretty easy to figure out why a few copyists added the verse. In Mark’s Gospel, his account of the same event ends with Jesus answering, “This kind can only be driven out by prayer.” (Some manuscripts include: “and fasting.”) Mark 9:29

When the person who’s tasked with copying Matthew’s Gospel comes to the end of Matthew’s account of the healing and he doesn’t find “This kind can only be driven out by prayer,” he remembers the account in Mark’s gospel does have that phrase and thinks, “I’ve got to make it match what’s in Mark’s Gospel.” So, he tacks on “This kind can only be driven out by prayer,” in order to make it match up with the account as written in Mark.

As humans, we get the idea that if two accounts of the same event don't exactly match, people won't believe them. But in reality, just the opposite is true, because two people will rarely, if ever, give the exact same details in the re-telling of an event. Crime investigators know that if two people re-tell what they saw or heard using the exact same details, they have gotten together and made the story up.

For example, if Violet and I were to tell about a crime we witnessed, she'd likely tell what color the guy's eyes were or describe his clothes and hair. I probably wouldn't remember any of those things, but I could definitely tell you the make, model and color of the vehicle he hopped into. Violet wouldn't have a clue about that. So, if both of our recollections came out word-for-word the same, that's a huge red flag indicating that we got our heads together and made it up.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net