



## HELP FOR UNBELIEF

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Mark 9:14-29

25th Message

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Our annual trip to Mexicali is the most significant outreach of our High School ministry. After a week ministering in Mexico, students and adults alike are radiant, not because they have been out in the sun all week, but because they have tasted a bit of heaven on earth. By stepping out in faith and using their spiritual gifts daily in situations way beyond their comfort level, they are able by the grace of God to draw others into his kingdom and draw near to one another and to the heart of Jesus like never before.

One of the most significant nights we share during that week is our final evening together around a campfire at the beach in San Juan Capistrano. There we are able to share how powerfully God met us during that week, and there we begin to prepare our hearts and minds to return home. We reflect on God's faithfulness to us, and we pray for one another as we embrace for the rude awakening that awaits us as we come down off our mountaintop experience.

It is easy to have a strong and vibrant faith when we're on top of the mountain. In Mexico we didn't have to struggle with an annoying sibling, an unbelieving girlfriend or an overbearing parent. Nor did we have to struggle with the temptation of drugs, the pressures of school, or the monotony of a job. It was tempting for many to want to stay huddled together on the beach under the stars and around the campfire.

During our mountaintop experience we were immune to the struggles and fears and doubts and threats of our life down below. But that is where we are called to live out our life in Christ—below in the valley. How often we want to hide away in the safe and secure confines of a mountaintop experience! These are the emotions that Jesus and his disciples are dealing with as they descend the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. Up on the mountain his glory was revealed and the reassuring voice of God was heard, but it is that same voice that directs them to the valley below to minister in his name. As it was with Jesus and his disciples, so it is with us. The foot of the mountain is where God has called you and me to engage in a spiritual battle where evil must be confronted and unbelief is a constant threat.

As we continue to follow Jesus through the gospel of Mark on Father's Day, it is only appropriate that after the Lord and his disciples descend the mountain they encounter a father. The meeting between Jesus and this father, and later between Jesus and his disciples, will encourage us that we are not on our own, that there is help for us to live a life of faith down off the mountain. This word will speak to all of us, believers and skeptics alike.

We pick up the story in Mark 9:14-18:

### A. The disciples are unable to cast out a demon because of their lack of faith (9:14-18)

**And when they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. And immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed, and began running up to greet Him.**

**And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" And one of the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it." (NASB)**

This incident is reminiscent of Moses' return from his mountaintop encounter with God only to find faithlessness on the part of Israel. Here also after his transfiguration, Jesus finds an unbelieving generation upon his descent. As he and the three approach the place where they had left the other nine disciples they notice a large crowd. In the center are the scribes and the Lord's disciples, involved in a heated argument.

We are not told the nature of the argument, but it seems likely that these scribes were sent by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to gather evidence against Jesus. Here they have the perfect opportunity to call into question the validity and nature of the disciples' ministry and that of their Master, because his very disciples are unable to cure the boy. It is obvious the nine were having a difficult time defending themselves before all these people, and at just the right time Jesus comes to their rescue.

As is usually the case, Jesus confronts his critics with a question: "*What are you discussing with them?*" he asks. Although he addresses the scribes, they do not answer. They are more than happy to publicly dispute and mock the disciples when Jesus is not there, but in the presence of Jesus and his question they fall silent. But the silence does not last very long. From out of the crowd a courageous, desperate man steps forward. It is the father of the boy. He addresses Jesus' question (verse 17): "*Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. And I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.*"

Respectfully, the father addresses Jesus as "Rabbi," and goes on to give a brief account of what has recently transpired. The boy's condition is critical. He is possessed by a demon of considerable strength. It deprives the boy of the ability to speak; it repeatedly throws him to the ground, causing his body to stiffen; and his teeth grind and his mouth foams like a rabid animal.

The father had intended to bring his grievously stricken son to Jesus to be healed, but noticing that Jesus was not in the company of his disciples, he then asked them to heal him. And why not? Hadn't they previously been successful in casting out demons and healing the sick? But in this case they fail miserably. The man had brought his son, believing in Jesus' ability to exorcise the demon, but the failure of the disciples, who represent Jesus, crushed his faith almost completely. If their strength derived from Jesus, then their failure would seem to imply that Jesus too will lack the power to heal. Thus

the father's belief in Jesus (and the belief of the entire crowd) is badly shaken.

The father had known about Jesus' reputation as a healer, and that is why he was there. But the miracles of Jesus were never intended simply to enrapture a crowd or develop a miracle-hungry following; they were meant primarily to give evidence that he and God the Father were one. Consider Jesus' words from the gospel of John: "*Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves*" (John 14:10-11).

Even though Jesus had previously performed many miraculous works, revealing that he and God were one, this one instance of the ineffectiveness of his disciples was enough to call into question their belief in his true nature and power. It is this unbelief that brings Jesus' quick and exasperated lament. His response to them is filled with deep emotion. Verse 19:

**And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?"**

Sorrow, disappointment, and even a sense of urgency are heard in this cry from Jesus' lips. He has little time left to soften their hard-heartedness and quicken within them a believing faith. But his exasperation does not immobilize him from taking action. Immediately after his lament he issues a compassionate command: "Bring him to Me!"

Verses 20-22:

## **B. Jesus delivers the boy after the father expresses his humble faith (9:20-27)**

**And they brought the boy to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling about and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"**

At the sight of Jesus the demon vents his terrible power upon his victim and the entirety of the boy's affliction is manifested before the eyes of the Lord. But instead of immediately addressing the demon, Jesus turns to the father and asks, "*How long has this been happening to him?*"

Jesus is not interested in the boy's case history, nor is he trying to gain information he does not already know. What he is doing is expressing his deep concern for the father and his son, and setting the stage for the father to confess just how desperate his need truly is. By asking the question, Jesus is helping the father realize what he is really asking. He is not asking for a medical remedy but a divine miracle, and this requires faith in Jesus as the divine helper. The question is necessary for the faith which Jesus aims to build into the man's heart.

Sensing Jesus' deep compassion for him and his son, the father feels free to go into greater detail concerning the boy's affliction. The seizures had been going on since he was a small child, and when the demon attacked, he tried to destroy him by throwing him into both fire and water. For years no doctor or medical remedies had offered any relief, let alone heal him completely. It was painfully obvious to all that help for the

boy could not be found resident in the power of men.

Notice that it is not only the boy who needs restoration. The father so closely associates with his son, and is so personally affected by this demon possession, that he says, "*But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!*" So tender and intense is his love for his son that the affliction of his child was an affliction on him as well. And so he pleads not only for his son, but also for himself.

But the father's request of Jesus is still beset with hesitation and doubt. He says: "...*if You can do anything, take pity on us.*" Even though he brought his son to Jesus as an act of desperation and faith, his "if You can do anything" reveals just how little faith, if any, he actually has. He doubts Jesus' sovereignty, and he lacks faith in Jesus' power.

Here, at this expression of the father's crisis of faith, Jesus again stops and probes further. Verses 23-27:

**And Jesus said to him, "If You can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the boy's father cried out and began saying, "I do believe; help my unbelief." And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." And after crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.**

Jesus is concerned not only for the boy's physical well being but the spiritual health of his family. Restoration of the man's faith would come only as Jesus reasserts his power to heal and summons the man to trust him. So Jesus says to him, "*If You can! All things are possible to him who believes.*" The father's "If you can" meets with a quick comeback from Jesus. He says, in effect, "Regarding your phrase, 'If you can,' the question is not whether I am able but whether you believe and are willing to trust me with your life and your son's life. The heart of the matter is whether or not you will let go of your doubts and disbelief and trust in me for healing. I cannot heal you if you do not first give yourself to me for healing."

Jesus says something similar in Mark 10:27: "*With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.*" The emphasis is not upon the degree, the quality or the amount of the man's faith, but upon his trusting relationship with Jesus.

My son Evan wants to learn how to swim and play in the big pool just like his older sister Olivia. I am trying to help teach him, but I cannot help him until he trusts me. He can talk all he wants about how much he would like to learn how to swim, but ultimately he reveals his strong desire to swim and his trust in me *only* when he lets go of the side of the pool with both hands and fully clings to me.

Faith in God is like that. It is a letting go of life lived on our own terms and our own strength and clinging with all our might to the love and person of Jesus. This is what the father finally does when he says to Jesus, "*I do believe; help my unbelief.*" Here is one of the great responses in all of Scripture. Not only does the man cry for help, he honestly confesses the poverty of his faith. He pleads for help just as he is, a doubter.

The verb tense which the father uses here suggests he is asking not only for help in this moment but he is petitioning Jesus to continue moment by moment and day by day to come to his aid that he may overcome his unbelief and be filled with a strong and vital faith.

The moment he says those words, the moment he casts himself in his weakness onto the Lord, Jesus rebukes the spirit and the son is delivered. Verses 25-27:

**And when Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." And after crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.**

The loud shriek of the demon and the now calm body of the boy are evidence that the demon has indeed left the boy at the command of Jesus. Actually, the body is so still that the crowd says, "Yes, Jesus, you cured him of the demon all right. He's dead." But the boy is cured, not dead, and Jesus gives witness to his new life and restored strength by reaching down, grasping his hand and lifting him up to his feet.

We should not miss the fact that Mark uses resurrection language here. The term he employs in relation to the boy is the same one Jesus will use to describe his own rising from the dead (Mark 14:28). The point is quite clear: the life-giving power of Jesus is not only for victory over illness and evil, but for victory over death itself.

But the story does not end there. There is work that needs to be done in the heart of the disciples as well. Verses 28-29:

### **C. The remedy for the disciples' failure is faith expressed through prayer (9:28-29)**

**And when He had come into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."**

Even though Jesus has just given this boy and his father a new life, Mark records nothing of the reaction of the boy, his father, the crowd, or the scribes. The spotlight at the end is on the disciples and why they had failed to heal the boy. They were at a loss as to why they could not cast out the demon. They had been given authority by Jesus to do so in the past and had much success (6:7-13). So in the privacy and seclusion of a nearby home they ask Jesus, "Why did we fail?"

According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus answers their question by saying it was because of their little faith. They lacked faith even the size of a mustard seed. Mark's account, however, records Jesus as saying their failure was due to their lack of prayer. And of course, these two go together. Where there is little faith there is little prayer, and where there is little prayer there is little faith.

I do not believe that Jesus meant the disciples needed a particular kind of prayer uttered at the moment they came face to face with the demon, because Jesus himself did not pray when he cast it out. What they needed was not trust in a special technique or set of words, but trust in an almighty and loving God whose healing power could flow through them. And this kind of faith can only come through a *lifestyle* of prayer—the kind of lifestyle that Jesus himself exemplified. He was always in touch with his Father, always walking in reliance upon him and drawing his passion and strength from him.

One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, has this to say about Jesus' prayer life:

Jesus continuously left his apostles to enter into prayer with the Father. The more I read the Gospels, the more I

am stuck with Jesus' single-minded concern with the Father. From the day his parents found Him in the Temple, Jesus speaks about his Father as the source of all his words and actions. When he withdraws himself from the crowd and even from his closest friends, he withdraws to be with the Father. "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there" (Mark 1:35). All through his life Jesus considers his relationship with the Father as the center, beginning, and end of his ministry.

If prayer was so central for Jesus to maintain his relationship with his Father, then how much more so is prayer essential for you and me?

Many of us can identify with the main characters in this drama.

Some of us are like the *disciples*. We are already believers in Christ, but our Christian walk is lukewarm and our ministry ineffectual at times.

The disciples had come to believe that the power to walk and minister effectively in Jesus' name was inherent in themselves. This was a subtle form of unbelief, because they began to trust in themselves rather than in God. Jesus gently reminded them that it was not they but God who overcomes evil.

It is no different for you and me. Our battle against Satan requires a lifestyle of prayer too. We need to be reminded of Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian church: "*Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil... With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit*" (Eph 6:10,11,18a).

It is only when the disciples were caught up short that they learned they did not possess any power of themselves. The power and strength they needed belongs entirely to God and must be received from him through a life of dependent prayer. But before we become too hard on the disciples, we ought to admit we are often just like them. We too are plagued by failure, too ready to engage in arguments, undisciplined in our prayer life, and more eager to learn techniques and depend on ourselves than to take time to walk closely with God.

Like a branch that thinks it can survive and produce fruit apart from the vine, we often act as though we can overcome life's struggles and minister in God's name relying solely on our own strength. As a church body we are so well equipped and so richly instructed that each of us must be careful not to lack in humble dependence upon God for all that we do. Whether we are teaching a Sunday school class, witnessing to a friend, discipling our children or loving our spouse, we must pray for his mighty work to be done in and through us.

There can be no excuses. In his book, *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen warns us about sacrificing prayer for ministry: "We have fallen into the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality. Our demons say: 'We are too busy to pray, we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal.' Prayer is a luxury, something to do during a free hour, a day away from work or on retreat."

But Jesus reminds us: "*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so 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, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:4-5).

We can be called and gifted, prepared and ordained to be the disciples of Christ, but if we do not remain in constant contact with the source of our power we will fail. God may have given us a gift, but unless we maintain a humble dependence upon him to express our gift it becomes ineffective.

As I reflect on this text, I am convicted of how this is often true in my own life and ministry. It is easy for me to fall into the trap of self-dependence, especially when it comes to preaching. One of the reasons I can get so stressed out over my sermons and over-prepare for them is because, lacking faith, I can depend more on the power of my words than on the power of the word of God to instruct, admonish and encourage you. When I do that I become merely a man of words, not a man of power. There is room for my faith to grow, and the Lord is graciously helping me to let go of my strength and cling to his.

Some of us here this morning are like the *father* in our story. Like him, our disbelief stems from disappointment. Maybe your faith has received a setback because of the shortcomings of those who profess to trust in Jesus. Maybe you have been disappointed by the Church and individuals within it. Whatever the reason, when it comes to the divinity and power of Jesus Christ, we find within ourselves a combination of belief and unbelief. Faith and doubt co-mingle when it comes to trusting him and putting our life and the lives of our loved ones completely into his hands. We sense there is too big of a gap for our very little faith to bridge.

The good news of our text, however, is that we need faith only the size of a mustard seed (Matt 17:20; Luke 17:6). It is not the size of our faith but the object of our faith that is important. We are not left on our own; God will supply where we are insufficient.

One of the most memorable examples of this struggle between belief and unbelief is found in Sheldon Vanauken's book *A Severe Mercy*. Vanauken befriended C. S. Lewis and relentlessly questioned him in his journey toward Christian faith. Vanauken describes his struggle this way:

Christianity—in a word, the divinity of Jesus—seemed probable to me. But there is a gap between the probable and proved. How was I to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the Risen Christ, I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see Him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these. And I continued to hang about on the edge of the gap.

And he remained on the edge of the gap until, he says:

I was forcibly struck by the reply of a man to Jesus' inquiry about his faith: "Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief." Wasn't that just my position? Believing and not believing? A paradox, like that other paradox: one must have faith to believe but must believe in order to have faith. A paradox to unlock a paradox? I felt that it was.

And then one day later there came a second intellectual breakthrough for Vanauken. He describes it in these words:

It was the rather chilling realization that I could not go back. In my old easy-going theism, I had regarded Christianity as a sort of fairy tale; and I had neither accepted nor rejected Jesus, since I had never, in fact, encountered him. Now I had. The position was not as I had been comfortably thinking all these months, merely a question of whether I was to accept the Messiah or not. It was a question of whether I was to accept Him—or reject. My God! There was a gap behind me, too. Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble—but what of the leap to rejection?...I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do, once I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it and flung myself over the gap towards Jesus.

It is when heaven and hell have both been glimpsed that going back is impossible...I confess my doubts and ask my Lord Christ to enter my life...I do not affirm that I am without doubt, I do but ask for help, having chosen, to overcome it. I do but say: Lord, I believe—help Thou mine unbelief.

To those of you in a similar position today, it is my hope that that will be your prayer too: "I believe. Help my unbelief." To you, Jesus says, "Come to me. Come as you are right now, with all your doubt, your disbelief, your sin, your hopelessness and restlessness." *"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light"* (Matt 11:28-30).

Is it possible for our lives to be transformed? Is it possible to bridge the gap between doubt and faith, weakness and strength? Is it possible to be at peace with God and have victory over evil and death? Jesus says it is all possible if you believe in him, if you trust your life to him and lean on his strength. All things are possible for us when we believe, because all things are possible for the One in whom we believe.

Heavenly Father, on this Father's Day I want to thank you for bringing before us a shining example of a loving father. May this remind us that you are our Heavenly Father, and like the father of both the prodigal and the proud son, nothing is too great to separate us from your love. You reach out to us wherever we are. We may be riddled with sin, doubt, or pride, and yet you love us and desire to draw us to yourself and make us whole.

I want to thank you for your word. I pray that it may penetrate deeply into our hearts and minds. For those here this morning who have not put their trust in you, I pray that they may see your love and power and cling to you. For those of us who have put our faith in you and yet so easily delegate you to the sidelines of our lives, I pray you would bring us to a place of humility that we might become a people of prayer and full dependence upon you.

Thank you, Father, for helping us in our unbelief, for initiating and strengthening our faith, and for bringing us into an intimate love relationship with you where we can experience and express your love and power. We pray in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.

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