

## Help My Unbelief      2.18.18 (Mark 9:14-29)

### **Who Are the Faithless Ones?**

The majority of this message turns on my interpretation of verse 19. Who is the “faithless generation” of whom Jesus speaks? “*O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?*” With whom is He so grieved, so exasperated, so frustrated? There are four options, which are not mutually exclusive:

- It could be the father, at whose words Jesus utters this cry of frustration.
- It could be the crowd, who had gathered at the scene in great amazement.
- It could be the scribes, with whom the disciples were arguing.
- It could be the disciples themselves.

I’m going to argue that Jesus’ frustration and disappointment is directed towards His disciples.<sup>1</sup> For one thing, what seems to evoke the grief and frustration of Jesus is the father’s statement that he had brought his boy to the disciples, but they were unable to cast out the demon. That inability of the disciples seems to me to be the “faithlessness” which draws Jesus’ ire. For another thing, in Matthew’s version when the disciples ask why they were unable to cast out the demon, Jesus replies that it was due to their lack of faith:

*Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” 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.”*  
(Matt. 17:19-20)

So I believe the best way to understand Jesus’ frustration and grief in verse 19 is to see it directed towards His disciples, who had been given authority over unclean spirits (6:7), who had themselves cast out many demons (6:13), but who were unable to cast out this particular demon because of their lack of prayer (9:29), which was owing to a lack of faith (9:19; Matt. 17:20).

Therefore, I believe we have two interactions in this text which demand our attention. There is Jesus’ interaction with the boy’s father, which provides us with a lesson in the wonder of Christ’s mercy even for those who are weak in faith, displaying that it is not the strength of your faith that saves, but rather the strength of the object of your faith, namely Christ. Even weak faith in a strong Savior receives the fullness of His mercy and compassion. Then there is Jesus’ interaction with His own disciples, which provides us with a lesson on the dangers of performing Christian ministry in one’s own strength, rather than by faith in the strength which God supplies. Faithless ministry is utterly powerless, as we shall see.

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<sup>1</sup> This is also the view of William Lane, John MacArthur, and Kent Hughes; William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 332; John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 26; R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 211-212. James Edwards believes the object of Jesus’ frustration is the crowd, citing the fact that “generation” (γενεά) occurs five times in Mark (8:12 [2x], 38; 9:19; 13:30), but never with reference to the disciples; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 278. Alan Cole believes the object of Jesus’ exasperation is both the disciples and the boy’s father; R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 220.

In other words, I almost have two sermons this morning, or rather I have one sermon that speaks to two different audiences. To those in desperate need, struggling to believe that God cares, that He hears your cries, that He is gracious and powerful to save, there is an encouragement here in the midst of your struggle. And to the church, to the disciples who minister in Christ's name, there is a warning here that there are two ways to do the work of the ministry, but only one results in the power of God to save sinners, to defeat Satan, and to raise the dead. We begin with the word to the disciples.

### **A Word for the Disciples**

When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, along with Peter and James and John, they returned to the rest of the disciples and found them surrounded by a great crowd, in the midst of a heated debate with some of the scribes. When the crowd saw Jesus, they were "greatly amazed" (ἐξεθαμβήθησαν), due perhaps to a combination of His reputation and the hope that He would settle the dispute, and they ran up to Him and greeted Him. Jesus asked them (most likely referring to the disciples), "What were you arguing about with them (i.e. the scribes)?" At this point a man from the crowd spoke up, telling Jesus that he had brought to Him his son who was possessed by a spirit that makes him mute and induces something akin to epileptic seizures. But when he could not find Jesus, who was returning from the Mount of Transfiguration at the time, evidently he asked the disciples to cast it out, but they were unable. Why this provoked a dispute with the scribes is unclear. It probably had something to do with their authority to cast out demons, since the issue of authority (2:6-10) and power (3:22) were major points of contention between Jesus and the scribes in earlier episodes.<sup>2</sup> The scribes were ever suspicious of Jesus and His disciples, who had neither their formal rabbinical training nor their sanction. They viewed Jesus as a threat to their carefully guarded position as the authorities of the religious life of Israel.

At any rate, the scribes play no further role in this episode. Jesus' attention is now fixed upon the boy, his father, the disciples, and the situation at hand. At the father's statement that the disciples were unable to cast out the demon, Jesus bursts forth in frustration and grief:

*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." (9:19)*

We will return to the interaction between Jesus, the father, the boy, and the demon in a moment. For now I want to skip ahead to verse 28, and the question which the disciples ask:

*And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (9:28-29)*

The point of Jesus' statement is not that there are different classes of demons, some which require prayer and others which do not. The problem lay not in this particular demon's power; rather, the problem lay in the disciples' powerlessness, which Jesus attributes to their lack of faith (v. 19) and lack of prayer (v. 29). That is why they were unable to drive out the demon from the boy, even though they had earlier been granted power to cast out demons.

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<sup>2</sup> Lane, 330.

When Jesus sent out the twelve, He gave them authority over unclean spirits (6:7). And they had exercised this power to great effect:

*So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.  
(6:12-13)*

So what happened? Why were they now unable to cast it out? Had they run into a demon that was too powerful for them? No, that is not what happened. If that were the case, Jesus' statement as recorded in Matthew would make no sense. According to Matthew, when the disciples asked Jesus why they had been unable to drive out the demon, Jesus replied,

*"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." (Matt. 17:20)*

If a mustard seed of faith will move mountains and make nothing impossible, then it cannot be that the demon was too powerful for the disciples. Again, the problem lay not in this demon's power, but in the disciples' powerlessness. So why had the disciples been rendered powerless, when just a few months earlier, they had been filled with power such that the demons fled at their command?

The answer lies in Jesus' frustrated and grief-stricken rebuke: they had grown faithless (v. 19), and their faithlessness was evidenced by their prayerlessness (v. 29). It seems to me, and I find evidence for this in their question to Jesus ("Why could *we* not cast it out?"), that the disciples had begun to imagine that the power to cast out demons resided within them, rather than in God, and therefore they had begun to trust in their own strength rather than God's. The reason why a mustard seed of faith will move mountains and make nothing impossible is because faith relies upon the strength and power of God, for whom nothing is impossible (10:27) and who moves mountains without breaking a sweat. The disciples, on the other hand, were in their own strength not only incapable of moving mountains, they were unable to remove a single demon from a boy. When confronted by this evil entity, they did not pray for God's power, they did not trust in God's strength, and they did not seek God's glory.<sup>3</sup> They arrogantly began commanding the demon to leave, and the demon simply mocked them. The scribes, then, seized the opportunity to declare that this proved the illegitimacy of both the disciples and their Master.

There is a vital lesson to be learned here for the church as we seek to do the work of the ministry. The power for effective kingdom ministry, the kind of ministry that bears real, lasting fruit, does not reside within us. Therefore, if we attempt to perform kingdom ministry – preach sermons, teach Bible studies, lead in worship, teach Connect groups, lead in AWANA, share the gospel, counsel a friend in need, etc. – if we attempt to perform such ministry in our own strength, relying upon our own wisdom, trusting in our own power, then our ministry will be eternally fruitless, just like the disciples who tried to exorcise a demon without trusting in and

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<sup>3</sup> "The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus (Ch. 6:7) was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God. They had to learn that their previous success in expelling demons provided no guarantee of continued power. Rather the power of God must be asked for on each occasion in radical reliance upon his ability alone." Lane, 335-336.

praying for God's power. So as we consider this point and its application for our own ministries, let me make three quick points.

First, I want us to note the *source* of kingdom power – that is, the power that produces eternally fruitful ministry. The power for effective kingdom ministry does not reside within the disciples of Jesus, it resides within Jesus Himself. Jesus made this point abundantly clear on the night of His betrayal and arrest:

*“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)*

Nothing. Apart from the power which Christ supplies, we can accomplish nothing of eternal value. This does not mean that we cannot produce by our own natural power fruit that has the appearance of eternal value. That happens all the time – churches with high production values attract large crowds, preachers with charisma attract many followers, evangelists with rhetorical skill and persuasive power make many converts. But in the end, it is all chaff that is destined to burn (1 Cor. 3:13). The only ministry that matters, that bears fruit that remains and redounds to eternity, is *supernatural* ministry, and supernatural ministry can only be performed by *supernatural* power. Yet there is a great danger in relying upon our natural gifts to perform natural ministry and produce natural fruits. But in the end, it is esteemed as *nothing* by Him whose judgment alone truly matters.

Second, I want us to note the *means* of kingdom power – that is, how do we access this supernatural power from Christ that is required to perform supernatural ministry? The answer is by faith, through prayer. And this, says Jesus, is precisely what the disciples failed to do. They did not believe that they needed the power of God to cast out the demon; such power now resided within themselves... or so they thought. Therefore, they did not pray. They just swaggered up to the situation and began doing what they knew how to do, what they had done so many times before. Except this time, God let them fail. He let them endure tremendous humiliation in order for them to learn this all-important lesson. Let us not make the same mistake. The only way to perform kingdom ministry that bears lasting fruit is to recognize the power required does not reside within me, to pray for God to supply it, and to trust in Him to do so when we ask. This is how we abide in Christ and so bear much fruit. Let me take you back again to John 15. Two verses later, in John 15:7, Jesus says,

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. (John 15:7)*

This is how kingdom ministry is to be performed – by grace through faith, or, put another way, by faith through prayer. So says Peter in 1 Peter 4:

*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies... (1 Pet. 4:10-11)*

If we would perform supernatural ministry, it must be performed by the supernatural power that God supplies. And God supplies such power by faith through prayer.

Finally, I want us to note the *end* of such kingdom ministry. Why does God do it in this way? I mean, why does God not give the power for ministry on a permanent basis? Why does He only supply such power only as it is needed, as it is prayed for, as it is relied upon? The answer has to do with who gets the glory. I think God allowed the disciples to fall flat upon their faces in this very public setting because they had swaggered into this situation, without praying, without trusting, imagining that they could handle it on their own because they were something special, they were Jesus' disciples, He had given *them* authority over demons. Therefore, if *they* had been able to cast out the demon, *they* would have received the glory and admiration of the crowd. The father would have thanked *them* instead of God. And God will share His glory with no man, not even His children. When His children move mountains, God will see to it that people know that the mountain moved because of the Father's power, not the children's. Let me demonstrate this from those two texts I've been referencing. First, in John 15:

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:7-8)*

The Father is glorified when, recognizing that apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5), we abide in Christ and ask for the power to bear much fruit. Then, in 1 Peter 4:

*Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 4:11)*

God is 100% committed to the demonstration of His glory throughout creation, and that is why He reserves the power for kingdom ministry for Himself, to be accessed by faith through prayer, so that when demons flee in terror at the command of His disciples, it is evident that they are fleeing from Him to whom all glory and dominion belong forever and ever.

So let us summarize the message for the disciples of Jesus, for the church. The power for effective kingdom ministry does not reside within us. Supernatural fruit can only be produced by supernatural power, and such power is not ours to command. It comes from God, and it is accessed by faith through prayer, so that God may be glorified in all things. I am very concerned that we get this point, that it be driven deep into our souls. I can preach sermons, and they can be very good – eloquent, interesting, even biblical – yet they will produce *nothing* of eternal significance unless by faith through prayer I study and write and preach in the power that God supplies. We can have Connect groups, and they can be very good – personal, applicable, cathartic – and yet no lives will be transformed unless by faith through prayer that power of God attends to our discussions. We can do AWANA ministry, and it can be very good – we can listen to verses and explain their meaning, do puppet shows and teach foundational biblical truth – and yet no child will be convinced of sin and learn to hope in Christ unless the power of God attends to our labor. The same is true of any and every kingdom ministry. Apart from Christ and the power which He supplies by faith through prayer, we can do nothing.

At First Baptist Nixa, I want us to fear the natural performance of supernatural ministry. It is so subtle, yet it is so dangerous, for it produces a kind of fruit that looks genuine, but is counterfeit. Any lasting fruit, any effective ministry, without exception, will only be performed

by the power which God supplies by faith through prayer to His glory. A prayerless ministry is a powerless ministry. Therefore, let us fear trusting in our own strength, our own natural gifts. The only way to move mountains and cast out demons, the only way to see people converted and transformed, the only way to see marriages restored and people set free from the bondage of sin, is in the power which God provides by faith through prayer to the glory of His name. That is the only ministry which matters.

### **A Word for the Desperate**

That is sermon number one from this text. Sermon number two speaks to a different audience and conveys a different message. You see, the father of the demonized child did not care in that moment who cast out the demon, by what power, or for whose glory. In that moment, he could not see past his desperate need. His only child (Luke 9:38) was the victim of the malevolent will of an evil spirit who from childhood had seized the boy with epileptic convulsions and repeatedly tried to kill him by burning or drowning him. What a frightening experience for a child; what a horrifying thing for a father to endure. This father is desperate, and in his desperation he had sought for this itinerant miracle-working rabbi. Not finding Jesus, though, he begged of Jesus' disciples to cast out the demon, but they were unable. Now, however, Jesus is on the scene, and He has commanded that the boy be brought to Him.

*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. (9:20)*

This demon had bested the disciples, mocking their self-sufficient arrogance. But now it was in the presence of the Holy One, and it was seized by fear and hatred.

*And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes." (9:21-23)*

The boy's father implores Jesus for help, pleading on the basis of His compassion. But his request is not one of faith, it is a shot in the dark – "if you can do anything..." Jesus immediately seizes upon that little conditional particle "if" (εἰ), that little expression of unbelief, and calls upon the man to make his choice – either Jesus possesses the authority to cast out the demon, or He doesn't. The man must make his decision. But he can't, he just can't. He cannot muster a faith that he doesn't possess. He doesn't know if Jesus can heal his son; he has never seen Jesus before. Right now, all he can do is hope against hope. Yet all that he has, he casts upon Jesus.

*Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24)*

Unable to muster faith, the man trusts Jesus with his doubt. Unable to believe, he trusts Jesus with his unbelief. And in the fathomless compassion of Christ, that is enough. That is the mustard seed that moves mountains.

*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." 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. (9:25-27)*

It is not great faith which receives the mercy, compassion, and saving power of Christ. It is weak faith in a strong Savior.

There is encouragement here for the desperate. There is hope for those of you in deep, pressing, anguished need. I may not be aware of what it is, but you are. It presses upon you like a room with collapsing walls. It kept you from even hearing the first part of this message. It may be a failing marriage; it may be a battle against sin that threatens to destroy you like the demon threatened to destroy this child; it may be a desperate struggle for assurance; it may be, like this father, the anguish of seeing a child suffer. There is hope for you in this text. There is hope for those who want to believe that God works all things for good to those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), and that therefore God will work this desperate situation for good as well, but you just can't. You cannot see light through your darkness; you cannot see a way out of this mess. You want to, but in your weakness and pain you just can't. This morning the Spirit calls you, through this text, to trust Jesus with your unbelief. Trust Jesus with your doubt. Cast all that you have, your pain, your fear, your anguish, your doubt... cast it all upon Christ. Say to Him this morning, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." When you cannot believe, trust Jesus with your unbelief. And that, too, is faith. James Edwards puts it like this:

"True faith is always aware how small and inadequate it is. The father becomes a believer not when he amasses a sufficient quantum of faith but when he risks everything on what little faith he has, when he yields his insufficiency to the true sufficiency of Jesus, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"<sup>4</sup>

This man did not have a rock-solid assurance that Jesus was the Son of God, that He possessed all authority in heaven on earth, that demons flee in terror from His presence. He wasn't sure what he believed. All he knew was that he was desperate, and that his only hope was in the compassion and help of this man whom he hoped was mighty to save. That was all he had, and he cast himself upon the grace of Christ for all that he lacked. And that was enough. It is not great faith which saves, it is weak faith in a strong Savior. It is faith which casts everything it has, even if that be very little, upon the compassion and mercy of Christ. This morning, I call you to do the same.

## **Two Sermons, One Savior**

This text speaks two words to two different groups of people present today. To the disciples, it is a reminder that apart from Christ we can do nothing. If we are going to engage in effective, eternally fruitful ministry (the only ministry that interests me), then we must approach every ministry by faith through prayer in the power which God supplies, so that to Him belongs all the glory. Remember that tonight at AWANA as you sit down with kids to go over the verses they've memorized. Remember that tomorrow as you head to work as a light in this dark world. Remember that this week when your friend calls you for counsel and advice. Remind yourself ten times a day, "This ministry cannot be accomplished by anything but prayer."

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, 280.

And to the desperate, this text is a reminder that it is not only great faith which receives the compassion and help of Christ. It is also weak faith that entrusts everything it has to Jesus, even its doubt, its fear, its unbelief. It is not the strength of our faith which saves, but the strength of our Savior. This morning, I urge you to cast yourself upon the mercy of Christ. Trust Him with your unbelief. Trust Him with your questions. Trust Him with your fear. If all you can say this morning is, "I believe; help my unbelief," then cry that to Jesus. It is enough.