

The Memoirs of Peter
No Faith, Weak Faith, & Little Faith, Part 3
Mark 9:14-29

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Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher

Countryside Bible Church

Well, I invite you to turn with me again to the wonderful Gospel of Mark as we continue our journey through this, really, trek with Christ, as we walk with Him through His life and see who He is and how He responds, to hear Him teach, to see His miracles.

Chapter nine began with the Transfiguration. Jesus and His disciples (Peter, James, and John) got to see the glory of Christ. They saw Him on Mt. Hermon, probably, but after that moment of glory, after that moment of amazing revelation, they come down the mountain and the scene entirely changes. Because in all three Gospels that record the Transfiguration, when the four men get down the mountain the next day, Jesus encounters a demon-possessed boy. Let me read for you again the story. Mark 9:14:

“When they came *back* to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 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 Him, ‘Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to *the ground* and he foams *at the mouth*, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not *do it.*’ And He answered ... and said, ‘O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!’ They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he *began* rolling around and foaming *at the mouth*. And He asked his father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. 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!’ And Jesus said to him, ‘If you can?’ All things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief.’ When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.’ After crying out and

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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. When He came into *the* house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, ‘Why could we not drive it out?’ And He said to them, ‘This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.’”

The healing of this demon possessed boy illustrates the importance of faith in our relationship to Christ. The main human characters in the story all reveal the true state of their relationship to Christ by their faith, or their lack of faith.

The first group that we meet in this story identifies those who have no faith. Early on the morning after the Transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James, and John descend from the mountain. And when they arrive where they’d left the other nine less than 24 hours before, they found this large crowd (as we just read), and in the middle of that crowd, the disciples. And they were engaged in an intense argument with some scribes. And Jesus asked the scribes, so what are you discussing with My disciples? The scribes, as they often did in the presence of Jesus, have nothing to say.

But the father of the boy who caused this whole argument, he suddenly spoke up, and he said, “Teacher, I brought You my son,” my son who’s demon-possessed: a demon that makes him unable to speak, that makes him have epileptic type symptoms, and (verse-25, Jesus adds) that makes him deaf. This father says I brought my only son to You, hoping that You would cast out the demon, but I was very disappointed to discover that You weren’t here, that You were on the mountain.

And so I asked the disciples of Yours, the Apostles of Yours, the other nine who were still down the mountain, I asked them to do something. But verse 18 says, Your disciples “could not do it.” In response, our Lord turns to the crowd and to the scribes, and He makes this stinging indictment. Verse 19. This is addressed to the unbelieving crowd, to the unbelieving scribes: “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

In Matthew, Jesus adds “unbelieving and perverted generation.” When Jesus spoke about those people who heard Him, who saw Him, who understood His miracles and yet still refused to believe, He called them “unbelieving and perverted,” who were exasperating the patience that He had. They had no faith; they refused to believe. The second focus of this passage shines on the father who brought his son to Jesus to heal. He represents all those who have weak faith. In this

section (a couple of weeks ago now) we met and were introduced to a man whose faith is weak, but who eventually comes to true saving faith. This man had some faith in Jesus. He thought perhaps Jesus could help him in some way. He at least had faith in Him as a good and compassionate man, but it wasn't true saving faith where he was willing to risk everything on Jesus. And so he has this interchange with Jesus in which he says this in verse 22: "But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"

Jesus responds to the man, "All things are possible to him who believes." All things are possible to him who believes. The focus of Jesus' statement here is not that faith itself is powerful: faith is nothing, faith isn't something, faith is merely confidence in someone. What Jesus is saying here is that there is absolutely no limit to God's power to act, and that means if we have true faith in the true God, He is able to do anything. This is really an indictment of this man's faith in God, his faith in Jesus.

Jesus is in effect saying to this man, the reason you don't think I can do anything to help is because you don't really believe in Me, you lack faith in Me, but the truth is I can do all things. Jesus says there's nothing impossible with Me. I love that. How often in life do we run up against impossibilities? In our own spiritual lives, how often do we run up against impossibilities? Jesus says, there's nothing impossible with Me. If you truly believed in Me, Jesus says to this man, you would know that healing your demon possessed son is nothing: it's not even the fringes of My power. Jesus wanted this man to see his problem was bigger than he could handle, but not bigger than Jesus could handle if in fact He's God—as He is. Jesus is calling this man to genuine faith in Him.

How did he respond? Verse 24: "Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, 'I do believe; help my unbelief.'" This man plead with Christ to give him the faith he needed. This is justification by faith, in the Gospels. He knew there was nothing else but to cast himself on God. In this remarkable account, Jesus brings this father from insufficient, weak faith, to true saving faith.

Now that brings us to today to the third focus of this passage. The first was on the scribes and the people who had no faith. The second focus of this passage is on the father of this demon possessed boy who was healed, and this father had weak, non-saving faith that Jesus brings to full flower in true, genuine faith in Him. The third focus in this paragraph, however, falls on the twelve: on the Apostles, and particularly on the nine who were left down the hill. And they represent true believers who manifest little faith.

You see, a question, a very important question has not yet been explained. Why had Jesus' disciples not been able to help this boy? Verse 28 says, "When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, 'Why could we not drive it out?'" Jesus often explained His teaching to the disciples once they got alone in private. We've seen it in the home He lived in in Capernaum. Often after He taught around the Sea of Galilee or there in the area of Capernaum, they would go into the house in which Jesus lived or perhaps the home of Peter (if they aren't one and the same); and there He would answer their questions. He would disciple them. He would explain His teaching. He would answer their questions.

Here, since they're still up in Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee, up near Mount Hermon, this is probably the house where they've stayed during their time there. And so they get inside away from the crowds, and they're still struggling with a very basic question: Jesus, why couldn't we cast this demon out?

Now, trace the Apostle's thinking with me here. Here's what they're thinking: Jesus, You hand-picked us as Your representatives. You see that in chapter three, when He called these 12 to Him and constituted them Apostles, constituted them His official, legal representatives. You picked us, and You gave us, essentially, Your own personal authority to cast out demons. You see that back in chapter three; in fact, look at that. Go back to chapter 3:15. Jesus called the 12 to Himself. He appointed (verse 14) "He appointed 12." He constituted them as an official group, "So that they would be with Him and He [would] send them out to preach." They are His sent ones, His "apostolos," His Apostles. "And to have authority to cast out ... demons." Same thing is over in chapter 6:7, "He summoned the 12 ... began to send them out in pairs, and [He] gave them authority over the unclean spirits."

So they're thinking, Jesus, You picked us, You made us Your representatives, You gave us Your authority to cast out demons; we've always been able to cast out demons before this. Chapter six, verse thirteen, you see the Apostles, "They were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them." So they've exercised this authority before. The train of thought goes on to say, and certainly, Jesus, You have authority over all demons. And so that leads us to, we should have been able to cast this one demon out of this boy. Why not? Why couldn't we?

Now what are the disciples really asking? This is absolutely crucial. Because none of us here have been hand-picked by Christ to be His official representatives. None of us here have been given the command or power or authority to cast of demons. We can't carry out that command,

but Jesus' disciples are asking a question that is very appropriate for us.

Here's what they're saying. Here's what they're really asking. They're saying, Jesus, You gave us a command, and You gave us authority and power, but for some reason we can't carry out that command. That was the question. That's a very important question, because every one of us sitting here tonight, everyone of us in this room, has been given commands by Christ. And according to Ephesians 1, we have been given resurrection power to carry out those commands in our lives, but we often find ourselves unable. And so what do we do when that happens?

We question, well, maybe it's the power. Maybe I don't have the power. That's it! I need to pray for power! Well Ephesians 1 says you have the power. The very same power that God used to raise Jesus from the dead is at work in you if you're a Christian. Why? Why did the Apostles and why do we often find ourselves having been given a command by Jesus, having been given the power to obey that command, and not be able to accomplish it? Jesus is about to give the Apostles an answer to their question, and at the same time, He's going to give us an answer to our question.

Why do we struggle along in the Christian life showing so little signs of the power of Christ and the power of the Gospel in our lives? The problem is not the promises of God. The problem is not the Word of God. The problem is not a shortage of power. So what's the problem? Our problem is the same as that of the Apostles.

Listen up. Here's the theological explanation. Verse 29: "And He said to them, 'This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.'" Now, note first of all the expression "this kind." The clear implication of that is that this particular kind of demon that Jesus has just dealt with (that'd inhabited this boy, that possessed this boy) was especially difficult. Why? Well, I think it's because it was especially wicked.

Jesus Himself makes this point on a couple occasions. In Matthew 12:45, He's talking about the person who sort of tries to reform himself without true power of God changing his heart. We all know people like that, who try to change themselves without Christ changing them. And Jesus warned them. He said listen, when that happens, the end result can be worse than the first, because the spirit that was there, finding a nice clean swept place, comes back and brings "seven other spirits more wicked than itself." Note that: "more wicked than itself." Same thing in Luke 11: "[He] goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself."

That's an interesting idea. I mean we understand that when it comes to people, don't we? We know that every person is sinful, every person is fallen. That's why we need the Gospel. That's why we need Christ. That's why we need His death in our place. But we also know there're different levels of evil.

The evil of a child who steals another child's toy deserves the label sin and the label evil. But that's at a totally different level of evil from the mass murderer. We understand that on the human level: there's evil and then there's *evil*.

But we really usually don't think of different levels of evil among fallen angels or demons. But that's exactly what Jesus is telling us. So Jesus is telling His disciples that this demon was more difficult, more powerful, more evil, more rebellious toward God, than the other demons that they'd encountered. And this particularly difficult kind (verse 29) "cannot come out by anything but prayer." (Now, I, depending on which translation of the Bible you have, it may add "and fasting." The King James does. Some manuscripts add "and fasting," but that's not where the weight of the evidence lies. So most modern translations simply say "by prayer," and that's the best reading here. There's a place for fasting, but that's a different message for a different time. This says "by prayer.")

So what does this mean? Jesus is saying, even though I commanded you to do this thing, and even though I gave you the power to do it, the only way you can successfully carry out My orders—is how? Through prayer. Through prayer.

This is one of those occasions where I think comparing the different Gospel accounts sort of helps clarify the meaning. Because here's what Matthew's account says: "And he said to them [here's the re-here's the answer to your question, why you couldn't cast this demon out], 'Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you [had] faith the size of a mustard seed, you [would] say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.'" This is the parallel passage. Notice there's no mention here of—what? Prayer. Here, Jesus says the problem is the littleness of your faith. The disciples had genuine faith in Christ, but it was little. There wasn't much strength of faith.

Now, what do we do with this? You put the two accounts together to get the full picture of what Jesus said. And obviously, when you put the two accounts together, Jesus is saying you've got one problem, but we can describe that one problem in one of two ways: you didn't pray, and you didn't have enough faith.

Now that immediately raises the question, why does Matthew say the cause is little faith, and Mark says the cause is no prayer? Or to put the question a little different way, what is the relationship between faith and prayer? Very interesting. We could say this: the first expression in the Christian life of true faith—is what? Always to call out to God. Isn't that true? Listen to Romans 10, "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed?

Now reverse that. You see what Paul's saying? He's saying when you really believe, what do you do? What is the natural reaction when there's true faith in God, true faith in the message of the Gospel in Christ? You respond in prayer. You call upon God. That's how the Christian life began, and that continues in the heart of the Christian.

William Henrickson, the great commentator, puts it like this: "Where there is little faith, there is little prayer. Conversely, where there is an abundance of genuine, persevering faith, there is also fervent, unrelenting prayer." They go together. They are flip-sides of the same coin. Prayer and faith are twins. They're always together. Why is that?

Well, let me illustrate it for you this way. If you had—God forbid—terminal cancer, if you had been told by a doctor that you had cancer (it was going to take your life), and you discovered that there was a doctor somewhere in the world who had found a cure for that kind of cancer you have, and the cure was 100% effective—what would you do? What would you do if you really believed that doctor had found a cure that was a 100% effective? You'd say, well, I don't know, I don't know if it's worth all the trouble, I'm not sure he can help me. No! You know what you would do. You would do what I would do. You would call and you would go and you would ask him to give you the treatment. You would ask!

The same is true in our interaction with God. If we believe He can help, we ask for His help. If we don't believe He can help, then we don't bother asking. Let me say that again: if we believe God can help, we ask; if we really don't believe God can help, then we don't bother.

So the reason for the disciple's failure, the reason for our failure to obey our Lord's commands and use the power that He's already given us, just as with the disciples, is the smallness of our faith.

Now notice how He goes on to develop this in verse in Matthew 17:20. "For truly." "For." The word "for" is, He's saying let Me explain this to you. Here's the reason your problem has to be

faith, it's got to be faith, because, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain." At this point Jesus may have pointed to Mount Hermon that He'd just come down. You'd say to this mountain, "Move from here to there, and it will move."

The mustard seed—you know this—was the smallest seed known in ancient Israel. And the point is that if God has authorized you to work miracles (and He had the Apostles), even a minute amount of true faith can work a great miracle, not because of the power of faith, but because it's in an all-powerful God. Now obviously here Jesus is using an extreme example. There's no evidence that He or any of the disciples ever actually moved a mountain. Jesus wasn't into jumping through people's hoops and performing little tricks for them.

The real point Jesus is making comes at the end of verse 20. "Nothing." That is, nothing I have commanded you to do and empowered you to do will be impossible for you if you have even a small amount of faith. I love what John Calvin says in his commentary on this passage: "He does not mean that God will give us everything that we may mention or that may strike our minds at random."

That's how some people interpret this verse; well, if I can come up with it, God will do it, He's got to jump through my hoops, He's a genie in a bottle. "On the contrary, [Calvin says] as nothing is more at variance with faith than the foolish and irregular desires of our flesh, it follows that those in whom faith truly reigns, those who really believe, do not desire everything without discrimination, but only that which the Lord promises to give." It's great. So the issue was the littleness of their faith. And how does true faith express itself? By calling out to God in prayer.

Apparently—putting all of that together—apparently, the nine disciples left at the foot of Mount Hermon, the Mount of the Transfiguration, heard this man's need that this boy was demon possessed; and they decided, Jesus has given us this power, we can do this, we've done it before, we can handle this. Now that may seem like they had a lot of faith, but in reality their confidence at this point was not in God, but in themselves.

The disciples had been tempted to believe that this gift they had received from God was completely under their control, and they could exercise it whenever they wanted. It was a subtle form of unbelief that encouraged them, instead of really believing in God, to believe in themselves. They couldn't carry out what they'd been commanded and empowered to do because of the littleness of their faith, and the littleness of their faith was shown by their lack of

prayer.

So if faith is the issue, we'd ask ourselves, what exactly is faith? There're really two primary expressions of faith. I've thought a lot about this over the last few weeks, because I think there's a lot of vague thinking about this. What is faith?

Number one: it is confidence in God's clear Biblical promises that are addressed to you. It is confidence in God's clear Biblical promises that are addressed to you. Not all the promises in Scripture are addressed to you. There are promises in the Old Testament that are addressed to ethnic Israel. God hasn't promised to give you the land of Israel, and there are many others like that. There are some promises in the New Testament Jesus directly gives to His Apostles. For example, He tells His Apostles that He will bring all things to their remembrance as they're teaching and writing.

(I hate to tell you students this, but don't use that verse. You know, I haven't studied Lord, but bring it to my mind. Not that I ever did that.) Clearly though, some promises of God are addressed to all true believers, and faith—are you ready for this?—faith is having confidence that God will do what He's explicitly promised you to do.

Let me give you an example. And I deal with this in my own life, and I know you deal with it in yours. We sin against God, and our conscience smites us. We know it's wrong, but the moment we sin, Satan comes to us with that lie and says, God doesn't want to see your face. Look at all He's done for you, look at His goodness toward you, and look at how you are treating Him—again! He doesn't want you.

True faith looks at the true promise of God which says in 1 John 1;9, that if we really judge our sin before God, if we say the same thing to Him that He says about it, if we confess it in its ugliness and desire to turn from that sin, what does He do? “He is faithful and just (KJV) to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Now, it may seem like it's spiritual to doubt that because, “I'm just so bad.” But in reality it is unbelief.

We take God at His word, and that honors God. It is confidence in God's clear Biblical promises that are addressed to you. I'm not saying you treat sin lightly. I'm not saying you say one time what your sin is and glibly expect God to get in line with your confession. I'm saying when you really pour out your heart in confession of your sin to God, He hears and He responds. He's promised; that's faith.

It's saying to your feelings, shut up! As Lloyd Jones used to put it, "Stop listening to yourself, and start talking to yourself." Not out loud, that'll get you in trouble. But you know what he meant. He meant stop listening to your feelings and emotions, and start talking to yourself with the truth of God's Word: what does God say? That's faith.

There's a second expression of faith, and it's confidence in God's ability to do whatever He chooses and whatever I ask of Him. Notice, it's not confidence that He *will* do it, it's confidence that He *can* do it. That's faith. Faith is not convincing yourself. And unfortunately I've heard Christians do this, and it's such a temptation because our thinking on faith is so vague. They think faith is—they have a member of their family in the ICU, going desperately through traumatic situation, perhaps facing death. And they think faith means, "I can't for a moment let myself believe that God might take this person; instead, I've got to convince myself. I've got to keep saying to myself God's going to heal them. I just know God's going to heal them." That's faith: God's going to heal them.

Well, you would be right if you said God could heal them if that is His will and His way and I believe that with all of my heart. That's faith. But it's not faith to say God "will," because where is that written? There is no promise in the Word of God where God promises to heal a particular person. Faith instead is being convinced that He can absolutely in a moment of time, as Jesus did so often on earth, restore the person to health. And He will do it if He chooses to do it, and I can pray that He does it. That's faith. But I can never come to the conclusion that He must do it, that He will do it, if it's not God's revealed Word. That's faith.

That's what Hebrews 1:11 says. Isn't it? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And he goes on to list all of those through the Old Testament who received God's promises or who believed God could do what they asked, and in many cases He did. Understand faith is not like a switch. It's not like a switch that you can turn on or off. You know, I believe today (sound effect)—it's off tomorrow. Faith is a lot more like a muscle that you exercise; in fact, read Romans 4. In that famous chapter on justification, Paul talks about Abraham, and he talks about how when he looked at his circumstances, what happened to his faith? (sound effect) Right down the tubes. He started thinking about how old his body was; this isn't going to happen. If he'd done that. But what did he do instead? Romans 4 says, "instead he grew strong in faith, contemplating the promises of God." Think about the person of Christ and the promises of God that are ours in Him. Or in the words of Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." That will strengthen your faith. That will grow your faith.

But when your faith grows, when it's not small, what is the chief way for us to express that faith? It's prayer. As one writer said, "Prayer is faith turned to God." Is that Biblical? I love this passage, and I quote it to my heart all the time. Psalm 62:8: "Trust in Him at all times, O people; [and] pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us." You see the parallels there? If you trust in God, if you really think He's a refuge, what are you going to do? You're going to pour out your heart before Him, because you think He can help. You're convinced He can help.

A number of passages speak to these promises. We're going to get to one in Mark 11; in fact, turn over to Mark 11 real quickly. I don't want to preempt all that I want to say about this, but look at Mark 11:22. You remember the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus uses it as a moment to teach His disciples. Verse 22: "... Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God.'" There's the issue. Understand, God can do whatever He promises, and God can do whatever He wants. And He can do whatever you ask if He chooses to do it. "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be *granted* him. Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* [to] you."

Now there are a number of pitfalls in this verse (we'll talk about when we get there), but I don't want you to miss the big point. The big point that Jesus is making is that we are to have faith in God, we're to believe He can do what He promised, He will do what He promised, and that He can do whatever we ask, even to the dramatic, even to the miraculous if He were to choose.

Jesus is teaching us the importance of prayer. I love what William Ames, the English Puritan—lived back in the late 1500s, early 1600s. His book *The Marrow of Theology* was the textbook for all the Puritans; in fact, it was, next to the Bible, the most common book that came over with the Puritans to the U.S. Here's what He says about prayer: "Therefore, we do not pray to God in order that we may make known desires till then unknown to Him, for He knows our thoughts far off (Psalm 139), that is, when they are not yet in our own mind; nor do we pray to Him in order to convert Him from an opposing-to-our-own point of view, for in Him there is no change or shadow of turning. We pray to Him in order to obtain by our prayer what we believe He wishes to grant."

I love that. Our faith expresses itself in prayer, and God responds to our faith by giving us what He'd already decided to give us. As Robert Reymond says, "Prayer is not the means God uses to give us what we want; rather, prayer is the means God uses to give us what He wants."

Let me just ask you tonight as we close our time together, what is it in your life that you don't pray about? Think about that for a moment. Is there a category of your life, are there things in your life, you just don't pray about? In those areas, according to what our Lord says to the disciples here—I hate to tell you this, I've hated to tell myself this all week—but you don't really believe God. You don't have faith in God. Because if we really believed God could help us, we'd ask for His help.

Our failure to ask means in our heart of hearts, we are not really believing He can do anything about it, He can't intervene in the world in which He made, He can't really help us in that way, in that area. When we find ourselves unable to do what God has commanded us, what He's given us the power to do, we must realize that the true problem may very well be that we lack confidence in God's promise or His character. And the way we can tell that is we're not praying, or we're not praying in faith believing.

True faith in God's promises will drive us to dependent prayer. How healthy is your faith in God? Here's the answer. Here's the thermometer to put at your faith. How much do you pray? One other quote from John Calvin which, frankly, leaves us all ashamed. He says that "We as Christians lie on earth poor and famished and almost destitute of spiritual blessings, while Christ sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, clothed with highest majesty, must be imputed to our slothfulness in prayer and the narrowness of our faith." We serve a great Lord, a great Savior. The problem isn't His resources, the problem is our lack of faith, evidenced by our lack of prayer.

Let's pray together. Father, we are absolutely convicted by what we've studied tonight. We acknowledge, O God, that we are too self-confident, like the Apostles were. We think we can handle it. We think we're capable, and then You remind us, even as You reminded them, that we're not. Father, help us to see the real problem. Help us to see the real problem is a lack of prayer, and that lack of prayer really shows our lack of faith. We don't really believe You can help.

Lord, forgive us for putting such a slur on Your great Name. Make us a people, O God, of prayer, who understand that not only can You intervene, You do intervene. You delight to come to the aid and help of those who fear You, those who love You, those who call themselves by Your name. Forgive us, even as we're reminded in that last quote, for being slothful in prayer, for having narrow faith and therefore living like spiritual beggars. Lord, teach us to pray. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.