

# **The Sin Of Unbelief Rebuked—In Believers And Unbelievers Alike**

Matthew 17:14-21

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If there is a sin which is at the root of all others sins, it must be the sin of unbelief. For to disbelieve God is to treat the Word of God as vain and empty words. It is to act as though God is not God, but rather that someone or something else is God. In fact, pride flows from unbelief, for pride acts as if man is wiser than God, more loving than God, more trustworthy than God, or more powerful than God. And therefore, upon man should the glory and honor be bestowed, rather than upon the Lord our God.

Dear ones, unbelief will lead millions of people to eternal torment in hell. For they will not trust alone in Christ alone for the promise of everlasting life made to them in the Gospel of Christ. But even for those who have embraced Jesus Christ and His righteousness through faith alone, there yet remain the temptations in our lives not to trust Christ's wisdom, not to trust Christ's truth, not to trust Christ's love, and not to trust Christ's power. In fact, we might say that our sanctification and growth in the Christian life consists, on the one hand in crucifying unbelief, and on the other hand in growing in faith. Each time we fall into a sin in thought, word, or deed, it is due to some degree to the weakness of our faith, i.e. unbelief—it is due in some way to having taken the eye of faith off of Christ and His Word. Thus, if we would grow in Christ, we must grow in our knowledge of Him and in our trust of Him. If we would overcome the besetting sins in our life, we must grow in trusting Christ and in applying His Word to our lives.

From our text this Lord's Day, we shall consider Three Examples of Unbelief: (1) The Unbelief Of The Scribes (Matthew 17:14-17); (2) The

Unbelief Of The Boy's Father (Matthew 17:18; Mark 9:20-27); and (3) The Unbelief Of The Disciples (Matthew 17:19-21).

## **I. The Unbelief Of The Scribes (Matthew 17:14-17).**

A. The unbelief of the Scribes speaks of the obstinate unbelief in the lives of all who reject the Lord Jesus Christ as we shall see.

B. As Christ and His three Apostles (Peter, James, and John) descend from the Mount of Transfiguration, where Christ allowed these disciples to behold a measure of the brightness of His glory (earlier Matthew 17), they approach the place where the Lord had left the remaining nine Apostles. As the Lord comes near (according to Mark 9:14), He sees a multitude gathered around His Apostles, and from the midst of the crowd He hears certain Scribes of the Pharisees "questioning" His Disciples (or more accurately, "disputing" or "debating" with His Disciples). Although we are not directly told what the issue was over which they disputed with the Disciples, the context of the passage will give us some clues.

C. The Lord asks the Jewish Scribes or scholars (according to Mark 9:16), what was it about which they were disputing with His Disciples. There is complete silence from the Scribes. They appear willing to go after the students of Christ, but very unwilling to engage the Teacher Himself. After all, they have been publicly embarrassed and humiliated on previous occasions by the Lord in such debates, and likely are not anxious to suffer such another public humiliation at the hand of the Lord. But in Matthew 17:14-16, we learn over what it was (most likely) that the Scribes disputed with the Disciples. For instead of the Scribes answering Christ's question, a father speaks up and tells how he had brought his son to be healed and delivered of a demonic spirit by Christ (Luke 9:38 says it

was his only begotten son, so as to show the desperate need of this father). But since Christ was not present, the father had appealed to His Disciples to cast out the demon. The Disciples had attempted to do so, but were not able to do so.

D. Whereupon the Lord issues a scathing denunciation against unbelief in Matthew 17:17: “Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you? Bring him hither to me.” Now that is a righteous, yet scathing denunciation against unbelief. The question is, against whom is this severe rebuke of Christ publicly administered? Against the Jewish Scribes who argued with the Disciples? Against the father of the boy that was demon possessed? Against the Disciples of Christ who could not deliver the boy from the demons? Or against everyone gathered there (the Scribes, the father, the Disciples, and the whole crowd)?

1. I would submit that Christ (most likely) addressed this harsh rebuke against the unbelieving and obstinate Jewish Scribes (and all those in Israel who followed them). For the context does not reveal unbelief that is obstinate on the part of either the father or the Disciples that would warrant such public reproach. As we will see, both the father and the Disciples suffered from a weakness in faith, but it is the Jewish Scribes, in particular, who were characterized by obstinacy in unbelief.

2. Moreover, it was not the practice of the Lord to issue such a public, harsh censure against those who were merely weak in faith, but there are clear occasions in which Christ issued such public condemnation against those who were obstinate in unbelief (in fact, just a few chapters earlier in Matthew 12, we see that the Lord uses similar language against these very same unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees, in Matthew 12:38-39). Who was it that most characterized the generation which obstinately disbelieved the Lord? It was the unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees and not this father or Christ’s Disciples that were believers, though weak in

faith. The Lord will indeed address the weakness of faith of both the father and of the Disciples later in our text.

E. Thus, we may infer that Christ was indignant at how these unbelieving Scribes had sought to attack Him through His disciples. Perhaps they said that the inability of the Disciples to cast the demon out of this poor boy was due to the inability of Christ Himself. By putting the spotlight on the weaknesses of the Ministers of Christ, the Scribes hoped to lead the people away from Christ Himself. Dear ones, this is ever the tactic of the enemy (since he can't touch Christ, he will come after us). Let us learn two lessons from this truth.

1. First, how we must ever guard ourselves and seek to live a life that is consistent with our profession of faith in Christ. For the enemy will seek to bring disgrace and shame upon Christ through our own weaknesses. "If that is the way a Christian speaks or acts, I don't want anything to do with Christ." How that should bring great pain to every true Christian to know that he/she has brought shame upon the name of Christ. Of course, since Christ is the perfect God-Man, none of us (due to our present sinful condition in this life) can perfectly reflect His glory. But what we can do when we fall into sin is to humble ourselves, confess our sin to God and to others, and seek the forgiveness of our Heavenly Father, as well as the forgiveness of others. That is a powerful evidence of God's grace effectually working in our lives, and a dynamic demonstration of the life of Christ flowing in us. What is it in your life and mine that may bring reproach upon Christ? There is God's grace and power to overcome those besetting sins, but we must first own up to them, and then begin to starve them to death rather than feeding them.

2. Second, inconsistency in the Christian's practice of the truth does not mean that something is wrong with Christ, or wrong with the truth of Christ. To the contrary, it means we are weak, frail disciples of Christ, who daily fall short of Christ and His glorious truth. Our

inconsistencies are never excusable (and they must be confessed, mourned over and repented of), but they make clear our need of Christ moment by moment, and they make clear the amazing grace, patience, and love of God in redeeming and sanctifying unworthy sinners like us, who daily fall into sin.

F. But oh the tragic end in everlasting torment that awaits all those, who like the unbelieving Scribes are an obstinate, faithless, and a perverse generation. Dear ones, flee the obstinacy of unbelief. Let it not take root in your hearts. Listen to the warning of the Lord from Hebrews 3:12. Rather turn to Jesus Christ and embrace Him alone for your eternal salvation, trusting only in His righteousness as your only merit before God. Meet every accusation that comes to your conscience with, “The righteousness of Christ is sufficient for my justification and sanctification.”

## **II. The Unbelief Of The Boy’s Father (Matthew 17:18; Mark 9:20-27).**

A. The unbelief of the father speaks of the weakness of faith (which is yet a form of unbelief) that is apparent in the lives of all who are justified by God through faith alone in Jesus Christ. I submit to you that the unbelief of the father is not an unbelief characterized by obstinacy like that of the unbelieving Pharisees, but an unbelief that is characterized by weakness in all Christians to varying degrees.

B. Upon bringing his son to Christ, the demon began to torment this poor boy in the very presence of Christ, in the presence of the father, and in the presence of the crowd gathered there.

1. The Lord asked the father how long the son had been in this condition, to which the father replied, “From his childhood.” How he came to be demonized from his childhood we are not told. Although the

demon sought to destroy this boy's life, God had preserved him until this moment in order to display His glory.

2. Dear ones, what absolute misery we would live in, whether in sin or in anguish of pain, or in demonic affliction, if Christ did not restrain the power of the devil in this world and in our lives. We may think we have it rough in our present circumstances of pain and affliction, but let us not pity ourselves (for only God knows how bad it could be without His restraint), rather let us pour out our thankful praise to the Lord who graciously has preserved us for His glory and even uses affliction in our lives to sanctify us, to sanctify others, and to increase our faith in Christ in preparing for heaven where there is no more sin, temptation, afflictions, or tribulation.

C. The father pleads in desperation with the Lord in Mark 9:22: "And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us" (that is, have compassion upon both my son and myself, for I too have suffered with him for many years). The plea of the father is not filled with unbelief as it might seem from the English text in the use of the conditional word, "if", but actually conveys from the perspective of the father a believing heart (although a weak faith). For what is conveyed in the words of the father is this: "if thou canst do anything (and you can), have compassion on us, and help us" (this in the original Greek language of the New Testament is called, a first class conditional sentence—that is, a condition that assumes the statement followed by the "if" to be true).

D. The Lord responds (in Mark 9:23) with the same kind of condition of reality when He says, "If thou canst believe (and you do), all things are possible to him that believeth."

1. Here the Lord is taking the father, who does trust Him as Messiah from a weakness of faith, to a strength of faith. The Lord

encourages the weak faith of this father, who had witnessed his son under the power of this demon for so many years, to look away from the needy circumstances of his son to the power of Christ.

2. Here (according to Mark 9:20) is this demon rending this poor boy with violent convulsions once again (as the demon had done countless times before), and as the father is looking with such grief, sorrow, and desperation at his only begotten son, this demon (whom the Disciples could not cast out, and who was even demonstrating his power in the presence of Christ) was attempting to take the eye of faith off of Christ to behold the power of the devil. And yet while all of this is going on, the compassionate Lord Jesus is building the weak faith of this struggling father to take his eye off of his convulsing son, and to place that eye of faith upon Christ alone.

3. In the words of Christ found in Mark 9:23 are the words of promise for this man to lay hold upon by faith: “Jesus said unto him, “If thou canst believe (and you can), **all things** are possible to him that believeth.” Will he believe that the demonic power he sees manifested in his son to be unbreakable because it has continued unabated for so long, and even now continues in the very presence of Christ? Or will he believe the promise of Christ: “all things are possible to him that believeth”? Will he walk by sight in what he presently sees, or will he walk by faith in the promises of God?

E. With tears now streaming down his face, the father confesses his own sinful weakness (not obstinacy of unbelief, but weakness of faith) in Mark 9:24: “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.” You see, dear ones, this man’s faith in Christ is even revealed by his confession of his own weakness of faith.

1. How each of us, who have embraced Christ by faith, need to hear this message to day: “all things are possible to him that believeth.” That is not to say that God will do exactly what we ask Him to

do in all circumstances, if we only exercise enough faith. We only see a slice of life at a time. Dear ones, we or our loved ones would never suffer, if it was left up to us. But the Lord knows the value of suffering in our lives in building faith and character and in revealing His power in the midst of our suffering. However, I wonder how many times, we do not see the power of God evident in our desperate circumstances, because we do not cast our faith upon the Almighty God for what we need? Rather our eyes can only see our present desperate circumstances wherein our son (as it were) is writhing in anguish before us in what seems to be a hopeless situation from man's perspective.

2. May the Lord bring us each one to confess our sin of unbelief and pray sincerely from the heart, "Help thou mine unbelief." How often throughout the day do we manifest such unbelief of heart without even reflecting on it? We have become so accustomed to looking at the fearful circumstances that surround us (or have placed our faith in everything else but the Lord Jesus Christ), that we have even forgotten that Christ declares to us through the apostle Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Is your God so small in your eyes that you seldom turn to Him with those seemingly impossible situations that come into your life, or with those situations that seem so small that you can handle it all by yourself? If so, that is the sin of unbelief. In so doing, we by our actions deny the power of God, and treat the Lord of glory as if He were just a man, who cannot help us.

F. The Lord commands the demon to come out of this poor son and never to enter again (Mark 9:25). After one last display of demonic power (in Mark 9:26), which Christ permits, so that all those gathered might realize the demon did not voluntarily come out, but rather came out because he had to submit to the Divine authority and power of Christ. Afterward the boy was motionless (as if dead), and the Lord takes the son's hand and presents him to his father whole (Mark 9:26-27).



1. Dear ones, the Lord is able to take our children, who are sinners by nature, who are children of disobedience by nature, who are blinded by Satan by nature, and by His amazing grace He is able to give to them faith in Jesus Christ. He is able to cleanse them from their sin. He is able to make them whole.

2. But, dear parents, do we have the desperate faith of this father? Do we shed the tears of this father for our children's salvation? Do we care that our children have an even greater need than being cast into a temporal fire by a demon (namely that of being cast into an eternal fire, called hell)? Let us as parents come like this father, confessing with tears, "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief." Let us make this the most important desire we have as Christian parents. Let nothing else stand in our way. Let us seek to remove all sinful stumbling blocks to our children coming to Christ, because the devil will use every means available to lead them from Christ (whether by leading them away from Christ into gross sin, or whether by leading them away from Christ ever so gradually and by degrees into relationships, endeavors, pleasures, studies, and activities that gain their heart and affection. The same happens to us who are adults as well. Beware. Watch and pray continuously, for the devil seeks to draw your heart and affection away from Christ.

### **III. The Unbelief Of The Disciples (Matthew 17:19-21).**

A. I must address this last point briefly. The unbelief of the Disciples speaks of the unbelief and weakness of faith on the part of Ministers and Elders.

B. The Disciples had been given the ability to cast out demons by Christ in Mark 3:13-14. But why were they not able to cast this demon out? Because of their unbelief Jesus says.

1. **Perhaps** they were trusting more in the gift itself, rather

than in the Giver of the gift. **Perhaps** they were allowing pride to take their eyes off of Christ, who gave them the ability, and rather boasting in themselves. **Perhaps** they were viewing the ability as something automatic, rather than something dependent upon faith.

2. We, who are Ministers and Elders, must realize that there is no gift or grace that one can put on automatic pilot and simply cruise into such a desperate situation, or simply cruise through our ministry. For we will find ourselves flat on our faces, due to a terrible fall into sin, that began as simply a very small fox. But it is small foxes left unattended that spoil the vine (Song of Solomon 2:15).

3. Jesus says, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.” Dear ones, it is not a perfect faith that is required in order to see the power of God demonstrated through the gifts of ministry. Jesus says, even the faith of a mustard seed is sufficient, if that faith is firmly placed in Christ and exercised through the means of grace, like prayer and even fasting on occasion. Here was the sin of the disciples. They viewed the power of God as a formula, rather than as a grace to be exercised through earnest faith in the Almighty Christ.

Dear ones, as you examine your heart right now, are you like that the unbelieving Pharisees, who trusted in their own righteousness, who thought themselves wiser than Christ? Jesus declares, “That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:15). Or perhaps you would say, I have trusted in Christ (and I am trusting in Christ) alone for my righteousness, forgiveness, and everlasting life. But I am like the father of that greatly afflicted boy—I believe, but Lord help thou my unbelief. Dear one, are you spending more time focusing on your sin and the devil (both of which are very real) than you are in turning the eye of faith and hope upon Jesus Christ and His Word, and spending time in prayer (lost in the boundless majesty of Christ and His work for undeserving sinners who will look to Him in faith)? I leave with you this

promise from the Lord: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace [Hebrew: peace, peace], whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusted in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the Lord JEHOVAH is everlasting strength” (Isaiah 26:3-4).

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