

# “Self-Reliance”

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 3  
Mark 9:14-29 (Mt.17:14-23, Lk.9:37-45) 8/5/2019

If you are a Christian, you probably don't have the kind of unbelief the boy's father had—doubting Jesus' power. But very often we have the kind of unbelief the disciples had, which is what really exasperated Jesus. This message will show you how to detect that kind of unbelief in your heart and overcome it.

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**Mark 9:14** When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. **15** As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. **16** "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. **17** A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. **18** Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." **19** "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

**20** So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion.<sup>1</sup> He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. **21** Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. **22** "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." **23** "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." **24** Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

**25** When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." **26** The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." **27** But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

**28** After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" **29** He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

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<sup>1</sup> This is the last time we see Jesus encountering a demon in Mark.

## Introduction

In our first session on this miracle we saw Jesus drag this situation out because he was dealing with a problem much bigger than this demon. He wanted to do expose this father's unbelief and build his faith. And it works. At the end the father is begging Jesus to help him overcome his unbelief. Then, Jesus leaves and goes into a house where he's alone with the disciples, and now it's time to work on their faith.

## This Kind

**28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"  
29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."<sup>2</sup>**

Very often commentators take this to mean the disciples had become lax in their prayer lives—skipping their devotions, and so they lost their power over demons. That's not what Jesus says. He's very clear—their inability was due to the **kind** of demon this was. The word is *genos*. We get our word genus from it. They couldn't drive this demon out because this was a species of demon that wasn't subject to their power. Most demons were.

**Mark 3:14 He appointed twelve-- designating them apostles-- that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach 15 and to have authority to drive out demons.**

**Mark 6:7 Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.**

So this was a power the disciples had. We've all been given different powers. God gave LeBron James the power to dunk a basketball. He doesn't have to pray first or seek any help from God. He can just decide to do that any time he wants and he can do it. For me, that could only happen through prayer and major divine intervention. If you come to me with a cut, I can put a band-aid on it. But if you come to me with a corpse, all I can do is pray and ask God to raise the dead. God has given me the power to put on band-aids, but not to raise the dead. If a friend is sick in the hospital, I have the power to drive to the hospital and read him some psalms—even without praying first, I've been given that power. But if my friend has terminal cancer, that's where my power runs out. If I want that gone, all I can do is pray.

For the disciples, driving out demons and healing was like me putting on a band aid or LeBron dunking a basketball. They could do it at will. Remember the beggar in Acts 3? He wanted money from Peter and John.

**Acts 3:6 Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.**

Peter didn't have money, but he did have the ability to heal a man crippled from birth. He could decide to do that at will, but if he needed money at that moment, his only option would have been to pray.

So all that to say, the vast majority of demons had to obey the disciples. But there are some big shot demons—maybe the powers or authorities in the heavenly realms, maybe one of Satan's generals. Whatever it was, this kind didn't fall under the category that Jesus had given them power over. So for this kind of demon, the disciples had to do the same thing all the rest of us have to do if we face a demon or any other kind of miraculous healing—pray and ask God to deal with it.

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<sup>2</sup> Most manuscripts add "and fasting," but none of the modern translations include it because it's not included in the best manuscripts and because copyists had a strong tendency to add hasting into verses about prayer, such as Mt.17:21, Acts 10:30, and 1 Cor 7:5. (A.T. France, however, still believes it should probably be included.) Also, this was an incident that arose suddenly. The man brought his son and asked for healing. It doesn't seem like there would have been time to fast. And the reference wouldn't be to a regular discipline of fasting because Jesus had already spoken of the inappropriateness of such a discipline while he was still with them (2:18-22). NICNT.

So Jesus doesn't fault them for not having the power. He faults them for how they responded when they ran into a problem that went beyond the power they had been given. You see, just because you have run up against an immovable obstacle that is far beyond your power to do anything about doesn't mean you have to fail. What can you do when you run into an impossible problem? Pray hard and trust God. And that's what they failed to do.

## Faith

We know it's not just prayer, but prayer and faith because when Jesus rebuked them, it was for their unbelief. "Oh, unbelieving generation ... this kind comes out only by prayer"—put those together and you see it's prayer and faith. In Matthew's account we find out that Jesus mentioned faith in the house as well.

**Matthew 17:19 Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" 20 He replied, "Because you have so little faith.**

Mark says prayer; Matthew says faith—they are interchangeable here, because prayer is the reflex of faith. Prayer is what you do when you really are depending on God. Prayerlessness is what you do when you're depending on yourself or something else.

## Varieties of Unbelief

Unbelief has a million faces, and we see no less than four of them in this passage. There's the scribes with their hardened, determined, irrational refusal to believe regardless of the evidence because of sheer hatred for Christ. There's the crowd with their typical gawking amazement without deciding to actually follow Christ. Those two are in the background in this passage. The real focus is on the other two kinds—the unbelief of the father and the unbelief of the disciples. The boy's father doubts Jesus' ability to do the miracle. He says to Jesus, "If you can do anything ...". For people like him, prayer is like crossing your fingers. "I hope this works." People like that will pray, but there's no sense of actually tapping in to an omnipotent power source. It's a little more like knocking on wood. There's no real power there, but it can't hurt.

And then there's the disciples' unbelief. They knew Jesus had the power. But when the normal methods didn't work, it just didn't occur to them to seek help from God.

At first we might be a little surprised to find out the disciples didn't even pray. But remember, this is a power they normally had. How often do you pray about something that you normally have the ability to do anytime you want? If you could bake a pan of brownies in your sleep, are you going to pray about it before mixing up the next batch?

## Self-Dependence

It's in those areas where God has given us abilities where we can drift into a kind of self-dependence. We just don't have a sense of neediness or dependence in that area because it just feels like we've got the power within ourselves. And so we don't pray. When you had your first child, you felt so inadequate, and you prayed so hard. But a while down the road of parenting, you get the hang of it, and what happens to the intensity of your prayers? You just don't feel the same desperate dependence anymore, so you don't pray as hard.

I think of Samson. Why on earth did he tell Delilah about his hair when it was obvious she was going to immediately tell the Philistines? I think it's because he had been strong his whole life. He never knew what it was like to lose a fight. I'm convinced he just thought, *I know as soon as I go to sleep she'll cut my hair and call the Philistines—bring 'em on! I'll kick the snot out of them hair or no hair. I'm a big guy, I've been in a lot of scrapes, I know how to handle myself. It won't be a problem.* It's just what

happens to us when we have an ability that God has given us. We lose that sense of dependence on God in that area.

That's one reason why it's so important that God allow us to have failures once in a while. I have all kinds of training on how to prepare a sermon, but once in a while God lets me run across one of those sermons that no matter how much I study, it just won't come together. It's like it's locked inside the text and God is saying, "This kind can come out only by prayer." Maybe you're one who can cook a pan of brownies in your sleep, but even you, every once in a while, find yourself staring at a plate of bricks thinking, *I guess this kind only turns out by prayer*. We need to be reminded once in a while where all the power comes from, including the powers God has given us to use at will.

But if we don't have a sense of dependence on God—we're not trusting in him, then when things go wrong, instead of turning to God, we turn against one another. Our first impulse is to find someone to blame—or some circumstance to blame. Our reflex isn't prayer. It's anger or panic or blaming someone or self-condemnation/depression or discouragement—anything but trusting God enough to go to prayer.

If we do manage to look inward, we so often locate the problem in our lack of giftedness, lack of skill or experience or knowledge, our temperament, mood. But how often do we diagnose a problem as, "I failed at that because of a lack of faith. I just don't trust God enough, I don't have a strong enough sense of dependence on him, and it's obvious in my prayer life"?

It's possible that it was something else. Maybe we do need to increase our knowledge or increase our skill or overcome some opposition from people. But probably more often than we realize, it's simply a matter of not enough dependence on God, not enough prayer, not enough faith.

The boy's father thought too little of Jesus' power; the disciples thought too much of their own. They knew Jesus had power, but they weren't depending on that because they had fallen into an attitude of self-dependence. It's like you're driving down the road just fine, then, oops, you're in the ditch. "God! A little help?" Now you're back up on the road. "That's God. I got it from here," and you keep on truckin'. God is like a winch you keep on your bumper for when you need to make a recovery, but when you're on the road just fine you don't feel a sense of dependence on him.

And when that happens, it leads to exactly what it led to here—ministry failure. And ministry failure damages people's faith, just like it did to this boy's father. How often do people come to the church with spiritual needs and they end up saying the same thing this guy said, "I brought it to your disciples but they couldn't help"? And they go away doubting God.

The stakes in ministry are massive. Eternal consequences—both negative and positive are at stake when we undertake a ministry and either fail or succeed. Even if you're not involved in any specific ministry at church, there's no avoiding the occasional person like this father who will bring his problem to you and ask for help. And you don't want Jesus to be grieved to hear that someone brought his son to you for help but you couldn't do anything because of lack of faith. It's so important that we constantly work on increasing our faith, and if you want to know how to do that, go back to yesterday's podcast, "From Amazement to Faith." That message taught one of many ways to build your faith.

Another way is to consider it pure joy whenever you face trials, and let the process go on until you reach maturity in your faith. I won't go off on a whole sermon on how to build your faith. My main purpose here is simply for us to allow this story to awaken us to how important it is that we not fail in ministry because of weak faith or self-dependence.

Why not take a few minutes right now to cry out to God to strengthen your faith, no matter what the cost?

## Summary

Unbelief has a thousand faces. The scribes refused to believe, the crowds stopped at amazement but never followed Jesus, and the boy's father doubted Jesus' power. But the disciples' form of unbelief, which is the one that was especially exasperating to Jesus, was a form of self-reliance. They had been given authority over demons, so they

became self-dependent in that area. So when they encountered a demon they couldn't drive out, they didn't trust God in prayer. We do the same in those areas where we normally have ability to do something at will.