

Lessons for Ministry

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 2

Mark 9:14-29 (Mt.17:14-23, Lk.9:37-45) 8/4/2019

What do you do when you feel overwhelmed by the evil in the world—or in the church? You feel powerless to do anything of significance, and the unbelief and disobedience to God is so exasperating. This passage shows us what Jesus did in that situation, and it may surprise you.

Introduction.....	2
Coming off the Mountain.....	2
Help One Boy.....	2
Things Get Worse Before Getting Better.....	3
Summary.....	4

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.¹ 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."

¹ This is the last time we see Jesus encountering a demon in Mark.

Introduction

I believe one of the purposes of this passage is to teach us lessons about Christian ministry. And the first has to do with the contrast between the mountain and the valley.

Coming off the Mountain

When Jesus came down from the glory of the Transfiguration into the nightmare of evil, suffering, death, and unbelief that was awaiting him, he probably felt like turning around on his heels and go right back up that mountain. We have mountaintop experiences, and we always want to stay up there, away from all the chaos and evil and suffering and unbelief. But that's not what God called us to do. In fact, it's very often immediately after our greatest mountaintop experiences that we drop into the most exasperating confrontations with evil. It was a great moment for Jesus up on that mountain. The only one that comes close was the one other time God spoke from heaven about how he felt about Jesus—his baptism. And what happened that time? Jesus was immediately slammed out into the desert to be attacked by Satan for a month and a half. And it's the same way this time—Jesus comes from the glory of the Transfiguration into a mess of unbelief that makes him wonder how long he'll be able to put up with it. It's the way life goes. It's exactly what happened to both Moses and Elijah. Moses had his glorious meeting with God up on Mt. Sinai, then he comes down and is immediately confronted with the idolatry and apostasy of the people, and it gets him so angry he smashes the Ten Commandments and has to climb back up for another copy. Elijah meets with God on Mt. Horeb, then comes down and has to deal with wicked Ahab and Jezebel and the murder of Naboth.

I made the point in the final podcast on the Transfiguration that you can't freeze time and hold on to mountaintop experiences. But Jesus shows us that not only can you not stay on the mountain, when you get back to the bottom, brace yourself to get hit with the full force of darkness, despair, suffering, and unbelief.

This is an important principle to remember in those times when you're tempted to drop out of church. You run into so many disappointments, so much sin, the churches you go to are so full of problems; it just seems like you'd be better off to just worship God alone in your own living room by yourself. That's a desire to go back up on the mountain. Go up there where the wretchedness of life can't reach you. It's comfy up there on the mountain, but it's not God's plan. We're not in heaven yet. The glory and rest will come soon enough, but in the meantime we need to wade in hip deep into the mire of the fall and bring God's grace into the brokenness, including the brokenness of the church itself—which is the most exasperating brokenness of all. We expect the church to be a mount of transfiguration, but it's not. It's the valley where there is evil and demonic activity and unbelief. And it's the fact that it's not supposed to be that way is what makes it all the more painful.

That's exactly the pain Jesus felt in this passage. He's not mainly upset at the hardened, bitter unbelief of the scribes or the indifferent, thoughtless unbelief of the crowds, or even the doubting unbelief of the boy's father. What made Jesus cry out in exasperation was the unbelief of the disciples because they should know better. We turn on the news and see the evil of this world, and it's distressing, but for those who love the Lord, the most distressing and discouraging evil of all is the evil in the church—when people in the church behave like the rest of the corrupt generation. And then you start to see that it's other churches too. The problems are world-wide, and it can be so overwhelming. You feel so powerless to do anything about it.

Help One Boy

So what do you do in those cases? What do you do when you are overwhelmed with the evil of an entire generation—the whole human race alive on the planet at the time? What did Jesus do?

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.*"

That's what you do. When you're exasperated and frustrated by the entire generation of humanity on earth, what do you do? You bring God's grace to one boy. And if that sounds like a lame compromise to you, if it feels too small, realize that was good enough even for Jesus! He's God in human flesh! You would think Jesus Christ, with all his power, would see the crisis of the generation and say, "I can't take this anymore," then wave his arm and bring great faith to a third of mankind in one fell swoop. He could, but that's not how God works. How does he work? He helps one boy, and his desperate dad—then later on he gives a one-sentence lesson to his disciples. Everything God calls you to do, you can do in bite sized chunks. Just be faithful and bring the grace of God to the people in your circle, and let God worry about the big picture.

Things Get Worse Before Getting Better

So that's the first lesson: God has called us to valley, not the mountain. The glory comes later. The second lesson about ministry is seen in what happens when Jesus confronts the demon in v.20.

19 ... "Bring the boy to me." 20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

So everything the father had described now actually happens right there on the spot. Up to now, the kid isn't having an episode. The demon was quiet. Everything seems fine until Jesus is brought into the mix. But as soon as this demon sees Jesus, he explodes.

And when I say, "explodes"—this demon was vicious. Back in v.18 where it says the demon threw the boy down—that word literally means to rip to pieces. It was used of a wild animal killing its prey by clamping its jaws into it and whipping it side to side. That's the word the father used to describe what this demon did to that child. And that's triggered by Jesus' presence.

If the story ended here, we'd say Jesus only made matters worse. That is very often the case when we apply God's solutions to spiritual problems—things get a lot worse before they get better.² Why? Because Jesus has a way of stirring demons up. We saw the same thing back in ch.1 in the first exorcism account in the book. They were having a normal Sabbath service in the synagogue, everyone was just fine, then Jesus shows up and one of the members starts freaking out. Jesus drives that demon out, but not before he makes a scene, screams and yells, and convulses the man violently. We see the same thing here—things get worse before they get better. The Gaderean demonic was known to have a demon, but then Jesus comes along and the next thing you know there are thousands of demons and they wipe out all their pigs. And the people beg Jesus to leave.

That's how it is with demons, and I can tell you from 25 years of pastoral experience, sinful people tend to respond the same way as demons. If there is a small problem in the church and you try to bring God's solutions to that spiritual problem, don't be surprised if it explodes into a huge problem before things get better. That's why a lot of churches don't even bother with church discipline. They have an unmarried couple living together, but they aren't bothering anyone, they aren't causing any problems, they are well-liked, everything is smooth. Someone says, "We need to follow Matthew 18." "No! Do you realize what an uproar that will cause? Do you realize the damage that will do?" And if they decide to go ahead and do it, very often those prophecies come true. It does create an uproar and all kinds of strife and chaos. It might split the church. And so in our human wisdom we say, "It would be so much better to just turn a blind eye to Matthew 18, and just 'love on them.'" We'll just love on them, and show them all kinds of kindness, and pretty soon they will be so moved by our love that they will feel convicted and fall to their knees in repentance. That's not what happens. You don't increase righteousness by ignoring

² For an example of this in Israel's history see Ex.5:21-6:1.

God's Word, but you can at least keep the peace in the short term. Demons and sinners will very often keep quiet if you leave them be. But when you start applying God's Word, look out.

So, lesson #1: God has called us to the valley, not the mountaintop. And if the magnitude of evil in the valley is overwhelming, just bring the grace of God to one kid. One boy's father. Give a word of instruction to some people in your circle of influence. Take a moment to pause and ask God, "What's my little boy right now? Where do you want me to bring some of your grace into a dark situation?"

And lesson #2: Realize that when you bring God's grace into sinful situations you can expect things to get a lot worse before they get better. Don't get discouraged, and don't let that keep you from following God's Word. If there is fallout for obeying God's Word, that's God's problem, not yours. This requires courage and lots of faith in God and his Word. Ask God to show you if there are any principles in his Word that you tend to shy away from because you want to keep the peace.

Summary

Lesson 1: When you want to leave the church because of problems, that's a desire to leave the valley and go back up the mountain. But God has called us to work in the valley. If you're overwhelmed, just bring God's grace to one boy like Jesus did. Lesson 2: The boy seemed fine until Jesus came, then things got much worse. God's grace often makes things get far worse before they get better. Don't let that stop you.