

Mark 9:14-29 We Always Need Christ Falls OPC PM September 11, 2022

Mark is usually fast paced, and he moves from action to action with his favorite word “immediately.” But here in our passage, Mark uncharacteristically has slowed down and has hovered longer, using 272 words to give us this story, while Luke told the same story using only 144 words, and Matthew dispatched this account with only 110 words.

Mark still tells this dramatic story with gusto, and yet his use of many words shows that there is something important here, that we cannot miss. The lesson is staying dependent on Christ. We must keep remembering and keep believing that apart from Christ we can do nothing, and yet with Christ, we can do all things.

**Perpetual dependency is an essential lesson; we always need Christ.**

### **1. When doing the Lord’s work. (v.14-18)**

As we start our passage, Jesus and the 3 disciples are returning from the mountain when Jesus was transfigured in brilliant glory. In verse 14, they are approaching the other nine disciples, who are down here working in the trenches, learning how forcefully the unbelieving scribes can argue. In verse 15, the crowds saw Jesus, and immediately left the disciples and ran up to Jesus and greeted Jesus. In verse 16, Jesus asked the scribes what they were “...*arguing about with [His disciples]*.” But in verse 17, the answer came not from the scribes, but from “*someone from the crowd.*” That ‘someone’ turned out to be the father of a boy who had a demon! This father’s request was what had started all of this arguing. The boy’s father now explained to Jesus that while Jesus was gone on the mountain, this father had approached the disciples, because the father aimed to ask Jesus Himself for help. Notice this quote from verse 17, “*Teacher, I brought my son to you....*” Then in verse 18, the father described the problem. A demonic spirit was in the boy, and since the demon itself could not speak, the demon also kept the boy from speaking. But that was not all. The demon had also been giving the boy seizures and convulsions. Regularly the boy would get thrown down, and experience foaming at the mouth, and grinding of his teeth, and all of his muscles becoming rigid. The father had the idea of bringing his poor son to Jesus, in order for Jesus to drive out the demon and remove all of these consequential problems. However, since Jesus had been absent at that moment when the father came to the nine disciples, this father was forced to be content with presenting his poor demon-possessed son to the ‘disciples.’ But the disciples were not able to cast out the demon!

The symptoms of the boy are similar to an epileptic seizure. However, all three Bible authors Matthew, Mark, and Luke label this not as a medical problem needing healing, but rather as demonic activity needing an exorcism.

The nine disciples had learned something while Jesus was up on that mountain - that they could not get this demon out, and this came as a surprise for them. Back in Mark 3:15, Jesus had sent the disciples to preach and to “...*have authority to cast out*

*demons*” and again in Mark 6:7, Jesus “...gave them authority over the *unclean spirits*.” Ever since then, possessing power over the demons had been the experience of the disciples, such as in Mark 6:13, where the disciples “...cast out *many demons* and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” But suddenly now, the nine disciples were surprised to learn that they could not cast a demon. They must be doing something wrong. They need Jesus to re-educate them, in order for them to continue doing the Lord’s work. That brings us to our second point.

## **2. When dealing with evil powers. (v.19-22)**

In verse 19, Jesus erupted into a rare diatribe expressing disappointment regarding the whole generation living at that time! Jesus has had enough of unbelief! The crowds were faithless, the disciples were powerless, there was a demon in a boy, and both the boy and the demon were speechless.

What was the remedy that Jesus commanded at this point? Not more teaching for the crowds, not further teaching for the disciples yet. Rather, Jesus asked for the boy to be brought to Jesus, so that in front of everyone, Jesus could drive the demon out. What was needed was for Jesus to conduct a public and visible demonstration of the power of Jesus to set people free. Once Jesus proved that He was able to free a boy from a speechless demon, Jesus would simultaneously prove that Jesus was able to free anyone in that generation from faithlessness.

In verse 20, the boy was brought to Jesus. When the unclean spirit within the boy saw Jesus, it reacted. What did the speechless spirit do? It again caused convulsions in its host – and again I say, that poor boy!

So, there was a spiritual showdown between Satan the Destroyer of life and Jesus the Giver of Life. As Jesus stood there, the demon caused the boy to roll around violently, once again including the demonic induced foaming at the mouth, without speaking a word.

While this continued to happen, in verse 21, Jesus turned to the boy’s father and asked him how long this sort of seizure activity had been happening to the boy? The father answered that it had been happening since childhood. So, this was not some recent or temporary problem. Consistent with dark demonic activity, we see the mean, relentless and murderous nature of the convulsions, as now explained by the father in verse 22. The demon has OFTEN cast the poor boy into fire and into water to destroy him. The father was helpless, the boy was vulnerable, and the demon was merciless. The threat of injury or death was real, long-standing, and ongoing. Injury to the boy was not just an occasional collateral hazard, but rather the sinister intent of this demon. The boy could not speak and the boy could not hear. Yet the boy saw all that was happening, like he was living in some tortured version of an aquarium. The father had a close affinity with the boy, and the father was suffering all of this along with his son, now pleading with Jesus to have compassion on us and help us.

The father was recently deflated by the inability of the disciples of Jesus to

remove the demon. The father had come looking to Jesus for compassion and help, but this father now in verse 22 expressed his own doubt regarding the ability of even Jesus to overpower this demon. The demon was currently active right in front of all of them, including right in front of Jesus, even while the father had this conversation with Jesus. Even some compassion might soothe the father and son, and any help that Jesus was able to provide, for example, to set some limits for sake of protecting the boy's life, would be better than no help at all. The man literally said to Jesus, "*if you can do ANYTHING...*"

### **3. Even for believing in Christ or praying. (v.23-29)**

Verse 23, Jesus echoed back to that father, the basic concept that the man had just expressed to the great Rabbi, "*If you can!*"

Then Jesus made a statement that was sorely needed in a faithless generation, a doubting father, and in powerless disciples.

*"All things are possible for one who believes!"*

The faith of the disciples was already in question implicitly, but now this father's faith was directly being questioned by Jesus!

Who rules the universe? This demon? No. God does!

Notice that in a very brief amount of time, Jesus put the focus back where the focus should be. The focus should be on the unlimited power of God in whom our faith is placed.

In verse 24, we see the immediate response of the boy's father to the rebuke and instruction of Jesus. This father's response has become famous to Bible readers around the world. "*I believe; help my unbelief.*" What this statement revealed was that it is possible to have inside of one person, a mix of both belief and unbelief! It teaches us that prayer is weakness. Prayer is not strength expressed, which is a focus on self. Prayer is weakness expressed, which is a focus on Christ.

The boy's father, mixed as he was, was now properly focused on Jesus. This man was quickly making spiritual progress. He had already moved from just another one of the many people in a faithless generation, to being a person possessing both belief and unbelief at the same time. Though the father was still weak in faith, at least he himself was aware of the problem. He was coming to Jesus for help with that. How? In prayer! Believing prayer brings us to Jesus, who conquers our remaining unbelief.

All that this father needed was Jesus, and any amount of faith. Faith that is the size of a mustard seed, still connects us to the whole Christ.

The strength of his faith, or the size of his faith, or the condition of his faith is no longer a part of this passage going forward. Rather, the attention goes where it should – on the authority of Christ, and the ability of Christ.

Verse 25, the command from Jesus to this demon was fuller in this case than in other exorcisms, in three ways, 1) Jesus included a description of the nature of this demon by calling it a “*mute and deaf spirit*” 2) Jesus told the demon that it was not the disciples commanding, but it was Jesus Himself who said, “*I command you*”, and 3) Jesus then not only commanded the demon to leave the boy, but also added a command that the demon never return. What a wonderful reassurance that statement must have been to the boy’s father!

In verse 26, we get the results in three actions. 1) The demon cried out. 2) The demon convulsed the boy terribly, one last time. 3) the demon came out of the boy. The demon had been responsible for the boy’s movements, and so now the boy lay still, appearing as if he were dead, and the crowds were saying out loud “he is dead.” But that was not true.

In verse 27, Jesus took the boy by the hand and lifted him up. Mark’s accumulation of words about death and rising in this verse show an allusion to death and resurrection. The boy had been under the power of Satan, and Satan has been dethroned. The boy has been released, and life has been affirmed. Here Jesus was not raising the boy from the dead, but rather was simply helping an exhausted boy up to his feet. This was not a resurrection, but it was an insight into the future meaning of Jesus’ own future resurrection. Satanic power brings death; but God’s power brings resurrection life!

In verse 28, the public event was over. Jesus left the scene and entered a house. The house was presented as the place of private questioning and instruction. The disciples, still smarting after their public humiliation as being unable to do what Jesus could do, were genuinely puzzled about the reason for their failure in this case with this demon, to drive it out. The disciples asked Jesus, “*Why could WE not cast it out?*”

In verse 29, we get the surprising statement of Jesus. Apparently, the disciples attempted to cast out a demon without praying!

This brings us to the main thrust of our whole passage. The disciples had become so confident in their own authority that they tried to drive out an evil spirit *without praying* to God for help! All demons in all categories are those who cannot be tackled in human strength! The disciples lost their sense of dependence on Jesus and His unique authority. The disciples became blasé, and thought of themselves as now the natural experts in removing demons. What the disciples were learning that day, was that in spiritual conflict, there is no such thing as automatic. Their public humiliation had been a necessary part of their re-education to the principles of the Kingdom of God. *Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing!* (John 15:5)

The actions of Jesus pointed forward to a time when He Himself would undergo the violent and abusive power of Satan and experience the weakness of the beatings. Jesus would not simply appear to be dead, but would actually die on

the cross. Then, in the triumph of His own resurrection, Jesus would conquer all the powers of darkness at once. Colossians 2:15, “*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [the cross].*”

At the same time as Jesus was pointing forward to His cross, Jesus was also laying down the principle of all spiritual service in God’s kingdom. God uses the weak things of the world to destroy the influence of the things which are mighty.

Every believer in Jesus may experience freedom from demonic control. Consider Ephesians 2:1-6, “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...*”

And because we have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us, all of us may rest assured of the promise in 1 John 4:4, “*Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*”

Today we may be free of demonic control in our lives, because of the power of Jesus the Son of God, whose spirit living in us is greater than the devil who is in the world.

Still, we do not minimize the power and presence of the devil. Only the power of the resurrected Christ can deliver you from the schemes and clutches of the evil one.

### **Concluding Application:**

1. God uses our failures to deepen our dependence on Christ. Here is the main question for the disciples....could they drive out the demon or not? No, they could not. But Jesus can. And if they were to keep relying on Jesus to do the Lord’s work, then Jesus would enable them to drive out the demon in His name with His power.

Three of these disciples got to go up the mountain with Jesus, and see Him in glory for a moment. A mountaintop experience is wonderful, but we cannot live up there. Back in verse 5, Peter wanted to build tents on top of the mountain! No, God wants us down here in the trenches, sharing grace with people who are hurting and suffering. God wants us to be distributors of His redemptive love. Remember that we will fail, and be encouraged that God uses our failures to deepen our dependence on Christ. Failure is painful. It is embarrassing. The question is, what is our response to our own failure? Will we be bitter or better? Spiritual victories in the past do not give us a guarantee of spiritual victory today. We must not trust ourselves, or our own resume or our own background. Either our response to failure can be life

altering in a good way, or our response can make us learn lessons that we will never forget. We learn dependence. Philippians 4:13, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* But without Christ, I cannot do it at all. Our weakness drives us to Christ. My limitations point me to the unlimited resources of Christ. Our humility pushes us to His sufficiency.

2. God uses our failures to discipline us in prayer. Faith that depends on Christ is a faith that prays to Christ. Luther said that the prayer of faith is in a way, omnipotent! That is because faith connects us to Christ. If we don’t have this sort of believing prayer, then Christ will correct us. We will get turned back to Christ, which is where we should have been all along. We keep getting moved back to Christ. In James 5:14-15, we have a built-in test. *“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the lord will raise him up.”* The test is – will we get distracted by the oil in the passage? Or, will we think that healings happen because of our prayers? The lesson we must recognize is that it is the Lord Jesus Christ whom we need, and it is the Lord who heals.

If we focus on our part, our praying, we will get prideful about our praying. If we focus on the size of our faith, we can get prideful about our faith, and ironically, stop relying on Christ. We must always focus on Christ. We must watch out for our own pride, rooted in our past accomplishments.

Whenever we get into the realm of the spiritual, whether it is family worship after supper, or leading a formal ministry event, if we approach it in our own strength, pride, and self-sufficiency, trusting in our own good track record, we have lost the spiritual perspective before we have begun the work.

When we fail, we must ask ourselves hard questions. Why did this happen? Is God correcting me somehow?

And if the answer comes back that there is a lack of prayer, we need to be deepened in our discipline in prayer.

Prayer is weakness. Prayer reminds us that we cannot do this, but God can. The discipline and correction offered by Jesus was direct. “Faithless generation” is what Jesus called them. The disciples were arising out of that very same generation that was faithless. They had faithlessly approached their work as disciples doing spiritual work of combatting unclean spirits. Jesus is the only authentic believer in the power of God His Father. We have studied in this passage the lonely Savior in anguish over the condition of the followers. Is it any different for us? On the mountaintop, Peter was short-sighted and wanted to build tents. Here in the valley, Peter and the others failed in prayer and had unbelief mixed in with their faith.

We need to have faith! However, it is not about the size of our faith. That was another lesson Jesus had to teach His apostles. Luke 17:5-6, *“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ 6 And the Lord said, ‘If you had faith like a grain of*

*mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

The key is not the depth and quality of our faith. The key is the person to whom our faith is directed. The key is not the depth and quality of our prayers. The key is the person to whom our prayers are directed.

A little faith in a great Savior gets amazing results. A small prayer to a great Savior, changes everything. The father of this boy had faith that was weak and small and mixed up with unbelief, but at least he was looking in the correct direction of looking to Jesus. The disciples had faith that was weak and small, and they needed to be disciplined to look to Jesus before attempting any spiritual work at all.

Ephesians 6:10, *"Be strong in the LORD, and in the strength of His might..."*