

Last time we heard Jesus words,  
 “if anyone would come after me,  
 let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

Jesus bids you come and die.  
 Deny yourself – turn away from *yourself*!  
 Take up your cross – come and die!  
 Follow Jesus!

He does not mean “try harder.”  
 He means “come and die”!

And as we saw last time, the power of the gospel is the cross  
 Because in the cross, the final judgment *has happened* – to Jesus.

Jesus has endured the last days wrath of God.  
 And therefore, all those who are united to Christ by faith  
 pass through death – and the final judgment –  
 and are united to his resurrection life!

But the disciples don’t get it.

Mark is often known for being the shortest of the gospels.  
 Certainly Mark tells fewer stories.  
 But the stories he tells are often *longer* and more detailed than Matthew or Luke.  
 For instance Mark spends 16 verses on this episode,  
 while Matthew and Luke each tell this in six verses.

### **1. Faith and the Faithless Generation (9:14-29)**

*14 And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. 15 And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.*

Why is the crowd “greatly amazed”?  
 Jesus has just come down from the mountain.  
 Some have suggested that his garments might still be shining –  
 like Moses’ face after he came down the mountain in Exodus 34.  
 But whatever it is, the crowd recognizes that Jesus himself is amazing.

The glory of God that had been revealed on the mountain was veiled,  
 but those who had eyes to see  
 could still glimpse the majesty of God in the face of Jesus.

*16 And he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” 17 And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him*

*mute. 18 And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”*

After the transfiguration there are only two instances where Jesus heals or casts out demons.  
In the first part of Mark’s gospel Jesus uses his authority to help many individuals.  
But now the focus is turning to what Jesus will do for the whole human race.

In the first part of Mark’s gospel, the emphasis is on what Jesus *does*.  
Now the focus will be on what Jesus *says* to his disciples.

What makes this especially interesting is the failure of the disciples.  
Earlier, Jesus had sent forth his disciples to preach and cast out demons (Mark 6:7).  
But here the disciples are unable to cast out the demon.

Modern commentators have noted that the symptoms sound an awful lot like epilepsy.  
We do not have to choose between demonic activity and disease.  
The “scientific method” cannot examine spiritual things.  
Much that is “physical” or “natural” also has a spiritual component.  
This is not to say that every case of epilepsy is demonic,  
but rather that the demonic *can* work through the natural world.

*19 And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?  
How long am I to bear with you?  
Bring him to me.”*

Who is he calling a faithless generation?  
The only people in view are this man and the disciples!  
But Jesus associates the entire generation as faithless.  
In so doing, Jesus reminds us of Moses,  
who spoke of the generation that lived through the Exodus  
as a “crooked and twisted generation” (Dt 32:5).  
Those who fell in the wilderness were crooked and perverse.  
And Jesus says that this generation is no better!

You are just like Israel in the wilderness.  
You haven’t improved!  
How long do I have to put up with you!

Jesus is about to lead a new exodus.  
He’s just been talking with Moses and Elijah about it!  
And now he looks around at the twelve—  
do you remember the time that Moses sent out 12?  
Ten came back saying, ‘let’s not bother!’  
and Jesus comments that some things never change!  
Even the 12 share in the deficiencies of the Mosaic generation.

Brothers and sisters,

it is true that some things never change!

But in Jesus, everything changes.

Paul will speak to the Philippians, reminding them of the wilderness generation, saying, “Do all things without grumbling or murmuring, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” (Phil 2:14-15)

How is it that Jesus can speak to the disciples as a faithless and twisted generation, and then Paul can speak of the Philippians as “shining” in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation?

Paul seems to believe that you are not part of that twisted generation anymore!

That is what Jesus is doing in verses 20ff.

He casts the demon out of the boy—

just as he will cast the devil out in his death.

How long will Jesus have to be with this foolish and faithless generation?

Until he changes their hearts!

I believe – help my unbelief!

*20 And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. 21 And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”*

The leper in chapter 1 had asked if Jesus was willing to help.

The father here suggests that maybe Jesus is unable to help.

“If you can do anything...”

*23 And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.”*

Jesus rebukes the child’s father.

If you can?!

Who do you say that I am?

*24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”*

This is very much the heart of our response to Jesus.

I believe –

but if I’m honest with Jesus (and I’d better be!)

I still tend to say “if you can...”

Help my unbelief!

This is the cry of the one who understands who Jesus is.

He is not seeking to be the greatest.

He does not claim to be the most faithful!

Far from it.

I believe. Help my unbelief!

*25 And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."*

Jesus here uses the rare pronoun "ego" – "I" –

as a way of emphasizing who it is who commands.

It is no longer merely a disciple of Jesus who commands the unclean spirit.

It is Jesus himself.

*26 And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. 28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*

This is an odd statement.

There is no indication that Jesus prayed

(most manuscripts say "prayer and fasting" –

and certainly Jesus did not have time to fast!).

It might take prayer and fasting for the disciples to cast it out –

but it responds immediately to the voice of Jesus.

What we see here is that the power of the kingdom has not yet come upon the disciples

(they have not yet denied themselves, taken up their cross and followed him –

the final judgment has not yet come upon them,

they have not yet received the HS).

## **2. The Son of Man Will Be Killed and Rise Again (9:30-32)**

*30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know,*

*31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered*

*into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."*

*32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.*

They knew that in Daniel the Son of Man is supposed to rule over all humanity –

and so the idea that the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of men

made no sense.

Usually when they did not understand they ask questions.

But they were afraid to ask.

Why?

Probably because they are even more afraid of the answer.

You know how that works!

There are some questions you prefer to leave unasked,  
because you know that if you ask them, the answer will be painful.

### **3. But the Disciples Want to Be the Greatest (9:33-41)**

*33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them,  
“What were you discussing on the way?”*

They were afraid to ask him questions –  
so instead he asks them one!

*34 But they kept silent,  
for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*

Jesus has been talking about his death.

This obviously raises the question of who will succeed him.

If his movement is to continue,  
someone will need to pick up where Jesus left off!

But immediately they recognize that this sort of bickering does not fit with Jesus teaching  
about “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”

*35 And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he  
must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them,  
and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever receives one such child in my name  
receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”*

Jesus knew the reasoning of their hearts.

He knows the reasoning of *your* hearts.

He knows how you like the pre-eminence.

He knows how you don’t like to take a back seat.

If you can’t run the show—you don’t even want to be involved.

But Jesus took a child and put *him* by his side.

Jesus pushes the twelve aside,  
and takes this little child,  
and says,

*“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,  
and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”*

The idea of “receiving” here connects with the themes of hospitality elsewhere.

How do you treat people?

I once met a man who advised me to stay in touch with “important people,”  
because they could help further my career.

Even hearing his words made me feel slimy and greasy.

The point is that we should not be competing for greatness.

If we are to be disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
then we are to be seeking for how to serve one another!  
How do you treat “the least of these”?  
How do you treat the children around you?

For that matter, children,  
how do you treat those younger than you?  
how do you treat those who are weaker?

Do you look for ways to serve others?  
Or do you want to be served?

In humility, consider others as more important than yourself!

Because that is what Jesus did for you.  
Also in Philippians 2,  
Paul tells us to have the same attitude—the same mind—that was also in Christ Jesus.  
*Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the form of a servant,  
being born in the likeness of men.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.*

But the disciples don't get it yet.

*38 John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”*

John had been there on the mountain.

He had seen Jesus' glory.  
He had heard the voice that said—“this is my Son, my Chosen One—listen to him!”  
And so he figures that anyone who is not with Jesus must not be for Jesus.

So when he sees someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus,  
he forbade him, “because he was not following us.”

Notice that John says “us.”

I think it is appropriate to stop and laugh for a moment.  
Jesus has just expressed his frustration at this “faithless generation”  
(exemplified by his disciples!)

Jesus has just rebuked the disciples for their squabbling over power and position.

And John says “us” –  
he was not following “us.”

Who does John think he is – to include himself with Jesus?  
Jesus has just said, “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow *me*.”  
But John says that this upstart was not following “us.”

At least Joshua was jealous for Moses’ sake!  
In Numbers 11:26-29 where Eldad and Medad began prophesying in the camp,  
and Joshua urged Moses to stop them.  
Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake?  
How I wish all of God’s people were prophets!”

Jesus’ response is similar.

*39 But Jesus said, “Do not stop him,*

and Jesus gives three reasons:

*for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.*

First, if this man is submitting to the name (and authority) of Jesus,  
and if he has success in the name of Jesus –  
no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit –  
no one can cast out demons in the name of Jesus except by the authority of Jesus.  
He cannot be an enemy.

Second, what is more, Jesus accepts the “us.”

*40 For the one who is not against us is for us.*

The disciples will learn eventually what this means.  
They will drink the cup that Jesus will drink.  
They will be conformed to his likeness in suffering.

They will deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him.

And so there will be an apostolic band who says, “imitate me as I imitate Christ.”

We are not to be a clique –  
we are to be a family, welcoming all of Jesus’ brothers and sisters –  
in whatever place we find them!

And third,

*41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.*

Giving a cup of water was the most basic form of hospitality.  
Jesus says that even the simplest acts of kindness will not go unnoticed.

#### **4. Keeping a Kingdom Focus (9:42-50)**

The conclusion of this passage takes four of the sayings of Jesus and weaves them together.

If you want to understand what it means to be Jesus' disciple,  
then think about these sayings in the context of what Jesus has said  
about not putting yourself first –  
and about keeping open boundaries:

*42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,  
it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck  
and he were thrown into the sea.*

Jesus is concerned for his "little ones" –  
certainly children are included,  
but Jesus' main point is to contrast the disciples' faulty notion of "greatness"  
with his concern for the "little ones."

The word here "skandalizo" means more than just "cause to sin" –  
it means to cause to stumble – which is a broader concept.

If you trip another disciple –  
if you disable them in their discipleship –  
then it would be better for you to be dead!

As R. T. France puts it,  
"To be the cause of another's spiritual shipwreck is so serious an offense  
that a quick drowning would be preferable to the fate it deserves." (380)

And what does it deserve?  
Just keep reading:

*43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.  
It is better for you to enter life crippled  
than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.*

*45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.  
It is better for you to enter life lame  
than with two feet to be thrown into hell.*

*47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out.  
It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye*



*than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,  
48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'*

You may notice that there are no verses 44 and 46.

Verses 44 and 46 are identical verse 48.

It appears that some early scribe thought that verse 48 should be repeated at the end of each of these statements, but the earliest manuscripts only include it as a concluding statement in v48.

But the point is clear.

This is the famous conclusion of Isaiah (66:24), where Isaiah says that the wicked will be eternally destroyed.

Some people have taken Jesus a little too literally.

It is said that Origen castrated himself due to his struggle with lust. Unfortunately, while it doubtless prevented him from acting on his desires, it did not succeed at changing his heart!

Jesus' point here is that you should be willing to get rid of anything rather than be cast out of the kingdom of God.

*49 For everyone will be salted with fire.*

What does "salted with fire" mean?

It is something that happens to "everyone" so it is not just something that happens to the wicked.

Ezekiel 43:24 spoke about how the priests at the consecration of the new temple would sprinkle salt on every burnt offering.

If Jesus is the one who will endure the final judgment on behalf of his people – then that means that he will then bring judgment on all the earth.

The theme of salt connects with the final saying:

*50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?  
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

Sodium chloride is a stable compound that does not lose its flavor.

How can salt lose its saltiness?

But salt in the ancient world was not pure sodium chloride!

The way you got salt was by evaporating water – with the result that salt invariable was mixed with other minerals, such as gypsum – which is also white but tasteless.

Just imagine adding gypsum to your food, when you thought it was salt –

it is slightly crunchy – but very bland.

You are to have salt in yourselves –  
in other words, there is to be peace.

Eating salt together was a sign of peace and friendship in the ancient world.  
Jesus says that his family – his community – is to be characterized by this peace.

And to this we must respond:

I believe.

Help my unbelief!

I want to be salt –

but too often I act like gypsum.