

“EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE FOR ONE WHO BELIEVES”

Mark 9:14-29

Key Verse: 9:23

“‘If you can?’ said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’”

Today we begin the section of Mark’s gospel which covers the time from Jesus’ transfiguration until his triumphal entry (9:14-10:52). Jesus especially focuses on teaching his twelve disciples. The main theme is Jesus’ repeated teaching that he must suffer, die and rise again (9:30-32; 10:32-34). Jesus trains the twelve with several specific topics: faith (9:14-29), humility (9:33-37), Christ-centered ministry (9:38-41), sin (9:42-50), marriage, divorce and children (10:1-16), the rich and the kingdom of God (10:17-31), servanthip and life-giving spirit (10:32-45), and then, again, faith (10:46-52). This section of Mark’s gospel begins with a teaching about faith and ends with a teaching about faith. Faith is essential for effective discipleship.

Today’s passage covers a very dramatic event. We find several groups of people: the arguing group--teachers of the law and nine disciples; the spectator group--the crowd; the suffering group--a father whose son is demon possessed, and the tormented boy; and the invisible group working behind the scenes--impure spirits. The event seems to be a demon carnival. Yet people did not address the root of the trouble. They were just arguing, blaming each other, and despairing. This event is a caricature of the entire generation of Jesus’ time. There seemed to be no solution and no hope.

Then Jesus stepped into the scene. When Jesus began to work, everything changed. What did Jesus see and do? Whenever a problem arises, as the first step, we need to diagnose it correctly. Then we need to find a solution. As Jesus surveyed the scene, he could diagnose precisely the root problem: unbelief of the generation. He lamented over their unbelief. However, he was not overcome by it. Rather, Jesus planted faith. Jesus said, “‘If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes.’” Then he drove out the impure spirit from the boy. We need this teaching in our time. We have many serious issues which we cannot resolve. People argue endlessly and

blame each other without addressing the real problems. In fact, the real problem may be the work of demons. We cannot defeat demons with our own wisdom and power. We need Jesus and his word, and we need to pray. With faith in Jesus, everything is possible. We can resolve the difficult issues. Let's learn how to experience the power of faith in Jesus today.

First, Jesus laments over the unbelieving generation (14-19). While Jesus was transfigured before his three top disciples, what was happening with the other nine disciples? When Jesus came, they were surrounded by a large crowd and arguing with the teachers of the law (14). What were they arguing about? We don't know exactly. The teachers of the law might have argued that the disciples were not certified to drive out demons. The nine disciples might have countered, "We drove out demons by the power of God and really helped people! You guys are all talk and no action." Their arguments went on and on until those watching developed headaches. At that moment, Jesus appeared. When people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder. They saw Jesus, their good shepherd! They saw Jesus, their healer, teacher, friend and Savior. The moment they saw Jesus, joy and peace filled their hearts. They left the futile argument and ran to greet Jesus. In a moment, those arguing had lost their audience.

Jesus asked, "What are you arguing with them about?" (16) The question seemed directed to his disciples, but they did not answer. They must have been embarrassed over their failure and perhaps they lost the argument and were ashamed. The teachers of the law did not dare say anything either. They were afraid to confront Jesus directly, especially because the crowd loved Jesus. As Jesus' question hung in the air, a man's voice from the crowd spoke up, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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" (17-18). This father loved his son dearly. When the boy was born, he was overjoyed. But sometime during childhood, an impure spirit possessed the boy and robbed him of speech. It also made him deaf, as Jesus reveals later. He could not hear his father's tender voice: "I love you, son. You are going to be a great man." Instead, there was a void. Though serious questions arose in his heart, he

could not ask his father to answer them. The demon cut the boy off from his father and other people. To make things worse, from time to time the demon would seize him and throw him to the ground. The word translated “throw” (*rhēssō*) implies with great force in order to break asunder. The boy was badly bruised and battered, yet he was helpless to resist; he was under the control of a demon. We can imagine the trauma that his father experienced every time the boy had a sudden episode. He frantically tried to help his son, but nothing worked. How frustrating and harrowing it was. His heart must have ached constantly.

Then the father heard of Jesus. He found hope in Jesus! He brought his son, but Jesus was not there. Out of desperation, he asked Jesus’ nine disciples to drive out the impure spirit. They were confident, remembering how they drove out demons during their evangelistic journey. So they tried, first one by one, and then all together. But nothing happened. To make matters worse, the teachers of the law began to ridicule them. To defend themselves, the disciples engaged in an argument. Their focus was no longer helping the boy, but winning the argument. Though they disliked the religious leaders, the nine disciples were becoming like them. Now the father implied the nine disciples were incompetent. This scene reminds us of leaders in our times who engage in endless arguments, ignoring the needs of their suffering people. They don’t address the root cause of the problems. Instead, they argue over symptoms. People need shepherds, but many leaders have no shepherd heart. They are not concerned about the suffering of ordinary people, but only their own prestige and gain. They blame others, justifying themselves.

How did Jesus see this situation? Let’s read verse 19. “‘You unbelieving generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.’” Jesus did not allow his disciples to become scapegoats. Nor did he blame anyone directly. Rather, he lamented over the entire generation’s unbelief toward God. It was not just one or two people’s unbelief, but the entire generation’s. Everyone was culpable in some way for contributing to the unbelief of the generation. We tend to think that unbelief is not so serious, as though it is a valid worldview and a matter of personal choice. In fact, unbelief seems to be natural, while those who believe are often regarded as narrow-minded and disruptive. But we should realize that

unbelief toward God is a very serious matter. It is as serious as sexual immorality, violence, murder, and cyber attacks. If evil is the fruit of a tree, unbelief is the root. An unbelieving generation bears many evil fruits. An unbelieving environment is especially deadly to vulnerable young people. A recent study revealed that about 40% of all deaths for teenage boys and young men are caused by homicide and suicide. These deadly acts result from anger, anxiety, and depression.¹ The source of many evils are demons working behind the scenes through unbelief. We should realize that our real enemy is the devil (Eph 6:12). We should fight against this enemy with faith. Who is responsible for the spiritual condition of young Americans today? We believers are responsible. We are the ones who should fight against the unbelieving environment and form a believing generation. But how?

Second, Jesus plants faith, beginning in one father's heart (20-29). After lamenting, what did Jesus do? Unlike some people who lament profusely and do nothing, Jesus did something. He showed people the way to overcome unbelief practically. First, he said, "Bring the boy to me." Jesus' words brought fresh hope to the discouraged and they brought the boy to Jesus. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. The boy fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth (20).

As the boy's condition worsened, it would be natural to focus all attention on him. Instead, Jesus turned to the boy's father. Jesus asked him: "How long has he been like this?" (21) Here we begin to see Jesus' purpose. It was not just to drive out the demon; it was to help the father. The father considered his son's problem urgent. But to Jesus, the father's problem was more urgent. Jesus did not inquire about his son to gain information. Jesus already knew everything about the boy. The father did not mention that his son was deaf; but Jesus knew this. Then why did Jesus ask, "how long has he been like this"? It was to invite the father into a heart-to-heart conversation about his son. How did the father answer? He said, "From childhood. 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" (22). The father revealed the depths of his agony to Jesus. There had been so many traumatic events. The demon would suddenly

¹ <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/5-most-common-killers-young-american-men-and-how-avoid-them/>

throw the boy into a fire, burning his hair and flesh before the father could rescue him. It had thrown the boy into ponds, rivers or wells in order to drown him, requiring more emergency rescues. How many cuts, broken bones and concussions had this poor boy endured? How many times had the father missed work? How many sleepless nights had he endured? He was making a valiant effort, but he was losing the battle. Why?

The father's words "if you can" reveal his problem. In his mind, he limited Jesus' power. We can contrast him to a man with leprosy who said, "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mk 1:40). That man did not question Jesus' power, but respected Jesus' will. However, this father questioned Jesus' power to drive out the demon. He did not realize that Jesus is the Almighty God who came into the world. He needed to know that Jesus is God incarnate, who can do anything. God is not pleased when his power and ability are questioned. In Numbers 11, the Israelites complained about not having meat to eat. God promised Moses that he would give them so much meat that it would begin to come out of their nostrils and they would loathe it. However, Moses doubted that God could do this. God rebuked him, "Is the Lord's arm too short?" Then the Lord sent so many quail that they covered the camp to a depth of three feet for a day's walk in any direction. If God wants, he can do anything. So when we ask for God's help, we should not limit his power, though we respect his will.

Of course, this father had a measure of faith to bring his son to Jesus. But when the disciples failed, unbelief grew stronger. When his son seemed to get worse before Jesus, he wondered whether Jesus could heal his son. He may have remembered his own previous failed efforts to have his son healed. He began to spiral downward. Negative thoughts, fear and fatalism began to rule him. If a sense of failure rules our hearts, it makes us negative. It causes us to give up easily and to even stop challenging difficulties. Perhaps we have experienced failures in raising a child or helping a Bible student. Our own sense of failure distorts our thinking until we doubt that even God can solve our problem. Then we can say to Jesus, "If you can do anything...."

When Jesus heard, "if you can," he was indignant. Let's read verse 23. ""If you can"?' said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for one who believes.'" Jesus

rebuked his uncertainty and challenged him to have faith in Jesus as Almighty God. There is no limit to God's power. God is pleased when people believe that he is almighty, and he blesses them. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). In order to receive God's blessing, the father needed to remove unbelief from his heart. Unbelief is like a rock that must be struck with a sledge hammer. Jesus said, "If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes." This word struck the father's heart and cracked open his unbelief.

The words, "Everything is possible for one who believes" are familiar to many of our church members. We experienced the power of God when we overcame difficulties by faith. But as time has passed, we hear these words less and less in our community. Some people consider the phrase "overcome it by faith" to be mere spiritualizing. These days even saying, "do it by faith," can be misunderstood as manipulation. But we need to think about the deep meaning of the words "by faith," which come from Hebrews 11. When heroes of faith in God's history faced extreme difficulties, they struggled to overcome them by faith. God accepted their sincere faith and did great miracles. Many of us have followed in their footsteps and experienced God's power through faith. Now we need to revive our faith all the more, so that the next generation may live by faith and experience the power of God. Let's make an environment where people freely say, "everything is possible for one who believes."

Faith is not static, but dynamic. Faith is not something we receive once and never again; faith grows and gives influence regardless of circumstances. Growing faith deepens our commitment to God. Martin Luther said that faith has three components: understanding, conviction and commitment. Understanding means knowing who God is: God is almighty, God is love, God is good all the time. When we understand this, we can have conviction that Almighty God always works for the good of those who love him. We can put our trust in God and commit ourselves to him, regardless of circumstances. Those who have this faith are not shaken, no matter what happens. We are more than conquerors.

Jesus shows us how to overcome an unbelieving generation. It starts from overcoming unbelief in ourselves and extends to helping others

overcome unbelief. In 1784 a seminary student, James McGready, overheard two fellow students questioning whether he had genuine faith.² He fell into a crisis and sought God earnestly through deep Bible study. In 1786 he experienced true spiritual rebirth. He became a powerful preacher gaining the nickname “Son of Thunder.” He was opposed by unconverted churchgoers who sent death threats and once burned down his church building. Yet God raised disciples of Christ through him who would later accompany him as he traveled west. In 1797 McGready began ministering in Logan County, Kentucky.³ People there were notorious for their frontier spirit; they fought bears and drank a lot of whiskey. McGready began to pray for spiritual revival with a few sincere believers, and to have open air meetings where the word of God was preached. The first year about 100 people attended and a few were truly converted by the power of the Holy Spirit. The next year 1,000 people came and many more were converted. Then 10,000 came, and the next year 25,000 came--which was 1/8th the population of the entire state of Kentucky. Logan County was transformed. Homes that had once fostered domestic violence became places of hymn singing and Bible reading. It was the beginning of the Second Great Awakening in America. When one person truly believes in Jesus, everything is possible.

One person in an unbelieving family who has faith in Jesus can be a source of blessing to the entire family. One person in a workplace, school, community or nation who has faith in Jesus can be an agent of great change. One person who has real faith in Jesus can influence their entire generation. When we think of unbelieving people around us, we are tempted to despair and become fatalistic. But God put us in our situation precisely to plant faith in Jesus in the people around us. In this way we can overcome the unbelieving generation. When we see that the society is dark, what shall we do? There are two options. We can sit down and complain and blame the darkness. Or we can shine the light of Christ with our own faith and help others come into the light. That is our choice. What do you want to do?

When the boy’s father heard Jesus’ rebuke, he awakened. He realized that the problem was not only his son’s demon-possession, but his own

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McGready

³ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mcgreedy-james>

unbelief. So he exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (24). He realized that Jesus wanted him to have faith. So he confessed, “I do believe.” At the same time, he felt that unbelief still hindered him. He could not overcome this unbelief by himself. So he asked Jesus honestly to help him. He did not blame others, or even ask for the healing of his son. He asked for help to overcome his own unbelief. This can be our honest prayer.

Jesus accepted the father’s honest prayer. Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again” (25). The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead” (26). But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up (27). Jesus blessed the father’s faith and healed his son completely.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” (28) Jesus replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer” (29). The disciples failed because they did not pray. Prayer is the expression of faith. Prayer is to depend on God, acknowledging our weakness. Prayer is to submit to God, surrendering our will to God’s will. Prayer is to believe that “I can do nothing, but God can do everything,” and to ask him humbly.

We are living in an unbelieving generation. God wants us to have faith in Jesus regardless of the situation. God wants us to help others to have faith in Jesus by sharing the words of God and praying for them. In this way we can overcome our unbelieving generation and render glory to God. Jesus said, “‘If you can?’ Everything is possible for one who believes.”