

THE POWER OF FAITH

Mark 9:14-29

Introduction:

The following letter was found in a baking-powder can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a long and seldom-used trail across the Amargosa Desert in western Nevada: "This pump is fine as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour in about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete. P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold."

Have faith - faith is something we often talk about, but I wonder if we really understand the importance and the power of faith. This morning we are continuing our studies from the book of Mark, and we are going to look at an incident that challenged the faith of a man who came to Jesus with a very severe problem.

We need to once again begin by putting this passage into its context. As we look at the text and the passages surrounding it, we see some very important teaching by Jesus that appears almost like bookends to the events of chapter 9.

Toward the end of Mark 8 – a major turning point in this account and in the life of Jesus. His public earthly ministry has basically ended. He takes his disciples to a remote area and asks them that important question, "Who do you say that I am?" The response that comes from Peter is that He is the Christ. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the One that God promised would sit on the throne of David. He is the One who will establish the kingdom and make Israel great again.

But immediately after this exchange, Jesus revealed a very important piece of information that did not seem to fit with their understanding of His role as the Messiah – see 8:31 – *read and discuss*.

That passage sets the context for the incidents in chapter 9. But at the other end of this section, immediately following our text this morning we have the other half of this set of bookends. Look at 9:30-32 – *read verses*.

These two brief passages define what was going on at this point in Jesus' life. He was trying to prepare his disciples for the most critical period of his life here on earth – his death and resurrection. In fact, this teaching did not end here. As they came closer to Jerusalem we find another clear statement from Jesus regarding his death – see 10:32-34.

In the meantime, Jesus took his three closest disciples up the mountain and gave them a glimpse of His glory. There he peeled back the covering of his humanity and they saw something of the glory of his Deity. The voice of God the Father confirmed the truth of what He had been telling them. He said, "...listen to him." Listen to what he has been saying to you.

On the way down the mountain they had another discussion, this time about the question of Elijah's coming.

- Before Messiah comes, the prophets say that Elijah must come. How can you be the Messiah, if Elijah has not come?
- Jesus response: the prophets also say that the Messiah must suffer. How can I be the Messiah, if I do not suffer and die?

Besides, Jesus says, Elijah has come. At least, we have a preview of his coming in the person of John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for the first coming of the Messiah.

Now, it is time to get into today's text, where we see an incident with an important lesson about faith and prayer.

A Boy with an Unclean Spirit vv. 14-18

Read vv. 14-18 and briefly describe the setting: a crowd... scribes... an argument... a boy with a demon – mute (only Mark mentions this)... the disciples inability to do anything about the problem.

This passage raises a few questions (with few answers) in my mind:

1. In Matthew's account, the father calls his boy an epileptic (NIV – he has seizures). Yet he also refers to a demon – *discuss...* Was this boy possessed by a demon or was he an epileptic? How do we know? Are all seizures and epileptic attacks demonic in nature? No, certainly not, but the Word of God is clear that in this situation an unclean or demonic spirit was responsible for the boy's condition.
2. Why does it seem that demonic activity was so common at that time compared to today? Could be many reasons... the occultic nature of pagan worship by the ungodly in NT times... Satanic opposition to the ministry of Jesus... we're just not aware of it today – we don't see evil as being demonic.
3. Why could the disciples not cast out this unclean spirit, this demon that was tormenting the young man? Just go back a couple of pages to 6:7 – Jesus sent the twelve out and gave them power and authority over demons. Yet, here they were, powerless to do anything to help this man and his son. I think we will see the answer later.

A Faithless Generation vv. 19-24

Jesus response: "O faithless generation..." Both Matthew and Luke say "...faithless and twisted generation..." - This is a common accusation that Jesus makes against the people of his day. Let me refer to a few texts, just in this book of Mark:

Go to Mark 4:40 ... Mark 8:12

"How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." *Read v. 20* - At this point the demonic spirit, confronted by Jesus, goes into a rage and throws the boy to the ground. Jesus then engages the father in a conversation, asking questions about the extent of his condition.

Read vv. 21-24 – comment briefly on the man's struggle to believe. We will come back to this in a moment...

A Remarkable Healing vv. 25-27

Read v. 25 – Realizing that the crowd was growing even larger, and wanting to ease any further embarrassment to the father and his son, he moved immediately to heal this young man. He spoke directly to the

demon and commanded that it leave the boy and never return. After one final attempt at harming the boy the demon was forced to obey – *read vv. 26-27 and comment briefly.*

A Puzzling Question Answered vv. 28-29

Earlier I asked the question, why were the disciples unable to do anything about this demonic oppression. Well, the disciples themselves had the same question – *read v. 28*

Note Jesus' response – v. 29 – *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer (and fasting)."* It appears that the disciples may have been trying to do this by their own power, instead of relying on and trusting in the power of God. Matthew puts a little different light on the situation. He records that when the disciples asked about their inability to cast out the demon, Jesus said,

"He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."" (Mt 17:20 ESV)

There was a problem with their faith. Not that they didn't have enough faith. Even faith like a grain of mustard seed can accomplish great things in the right situation and properly applied. The problem appears to be that they were trusting in themselves instead of the one who could do something about the situation.

Conclusion

As we wrap this up I want to camp on this issue of faith for a few minutes. I want to go back to the exchange between Jesus and this man in vv. 22-24 - *read verses.*

The man's statement... "If you can do anything," If there is anything you can do about our situation, please have compassion on us. It's almost a question... is there anything you can do?

Jesus' reply – "If you can!?!?" What do you mean, if I can? Of course I can. The real question is, do you believe that I can? All things are possible for one who believes. Jesus healed many people who had little or no

faith. But for some reason he emphasized faith in this case. It seems that he was wanting to make a point, not only to this man but to the crowd that had gathered around. So, what did he mean?

Remember what Matthew said? The disciples asked why they could not cast out the demon, and He replied, *"Because of your little faith..."* He went on to talk about the power of faith like a grain of mustard seed.

"All things are possible for one who believes." The question is, believes in what, or whom? That is the significant issue. So many people talk about faith or belief as though it is measured by quantity. "If you just have enough faith..." as though you have some kind of container and you have to develop enough faith to fill it. The key is not the amount of your faith, but the object of your faith. In whom or what are you believing?

Faith is not some kind of magic potion, yet I think many people have put their faith in faith itself, believing that if they just believe something strongly enough, they will get it.

Illust. – Believing impossible things – quote from the White Queen in Alice in Wonderland.

Our faith must be centred in the truth, in what is real. For example, no matter how much you believe that I could fly a plane to take you to Vancouver, it just isn't going to happen.

So, the real question we must consider is not God's ability to do something, but our faith in His ability and our trust in Him to do what is right and good.

Yes, sometimes we will doubt. Sometimes, our faith fails. Sometimes, we may be like the man who cried out, *"I believe, help my unbelief."* I don't think God disparages that kind of attitude. I believe that is the kind of prayer He answers.

In closing, let me just say this – the most important prayer of faith you will ever pray is when you come to believe that God is the answer to your sin problem. Saving faith is believing that, even though your sin makes you unfit for heaven, Jesus' death paid for that sin. And he offers you eternal life, if you will only trust him and put your faith in Him.