

## Jason Upchurch - Mark 9:14-29 - The Good News of Jesus's Compassion

We are back in Mark's gospel this morning and the big picture is that the Lord Jesus is gracious to us despite our unbelief.

That's really what we see all throughout this little section. As Mark's gospel has gone on, Jesus shows more and more power and more and more glory. But at the same time he shows more and more, the faith of the disciples and the crowds seem to get less and less.

It's like a graph where one line is going up and up and another line is going down and down.

And I think this is going to be an encouraging passage for us this morning because I don't know about you but I struggle to have faith. Sometimes I struggle to believe the promises of God. It's easy to say we know the promises and know who God is. But it's altogether something different to actually believe it.

We know Jesus says he'll never leave us or forsake us, but do we actually believe that?

We know the Holy Spirit is our comforter, but in times of grief do we actually believe that?

We know the Scriptures are life, but do we actually believe it enough to read them?

We know God is good and in control of all things, but in times of hardship do we praise him and rejoice?

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away...what? Blessed be the name of the Lord.

It's one thing to have knowledge about something, it's another to have faith. To trust and believe.

Last year we went to Silverwood. I love roller coasters. And we went on Stunt Pilot and I'm a big proponent of putting your hands up going over the cliff. Hands up the whole time. I know that steel structure isn't going to fail. I know the straps will keep me in. I know it won't crash. But I'll be honest, I had my hands up going over the first drop off and as soon as I went over the edge, they came right back down. Why?

All of my knowledge was the same, but in the moment do I trust? In the moment, do I believe? And functionally the answer was 'no.' I didn't trust it, I didn't believe all the things I said I believed when I was standing on the ground below.

You guys, that's how we often are with God. We say we believe these doctrines and this truth. But we find out what we really believe when we go over the edge.

This has been the struggle of the people of God for time immemorial. Adam struggled to believe that God had really said to not eat the fruit, so he ate. Abraham struggled to believe God would really provide a child in his old age, so he slept with Hagar.

And if you think about it, this is one of the most audacious things we do to God: simply not believe him. This is God almighty, the one who made the stars, who knows us by name, every hair on our head. The God who parted the sea, fed the people of Israel miraculously, made the sun stand still, turned the sun back, destroyed 185,000 Assyrians in a single night, stopped the mouths of lions.

Paul says in **Acts 26:8**: why is it found among any of you incredible that God raises the dead? "You guys, this is God we're talking about here."

We know all that, and yet we struggle, don't we?

Jesus is still gracious despite our unbelief.

Now, remember where we're at. Jesus has just transfigured himself before 3 of the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's shown his divine glory in the most obvious and amazing ways. Moses is up there and

Elijah is up there with Jesus and the 3. Elijah and Moses were prominent OT figures who had seen God in all his glory and both who specifically looked forward to the Christ. So they're on the mountain to verify that Jesus is the divine Christ everyone's been waiting for.

But that event is over and now they're coming down from the mountain. And again we're to be reminded of Mt. Sinai.

You remember when Moses came down from Sinai after receiving the 10 commandments? Remember how all the people of Israel were sitting in nice neat rows, calmly and peacefully worshipping God in the quietness of their hearts?

Yeah, that didn't happen did it? No, they were at the bottom of the mountain committing idolatry and sexual immorality. They were dancing around a golden calf that Aaron - Aaron, like Moses's brother, Aaron - had made and then lied about making. God had wanted to destroy them all, but Moses interceded and kept them alive. Instead, God sent in the Levites who went through and killed 3,000 of the offenders because they had become so debauched. You can read about that fateful story in Israel's history in **Exo. 32**.

And what played out in Israel 1,400 years earlier is playing out again. And you'd think that all these people who have been following Jesus around for a couple of years now would behave themselves for just a little while Jesus and Peter, James and John are up on the mountain.

But when Jesus come down off the mountain the people are functionally denying Jesus just like the Israelites were functionally denying Yahweh back in **Exodus 32**. They're not having a massive orgy at the bottom of the mountain, but they are functionally rejecting Jesus through unbelief.

Jesus comes down from this amazing revelation of who he is and the response is rampant unbelief.

So our outline this morning is pretty simple: We're going to see unbelief in the scribes, in the disciples, and in the father. And then we're going to see that Jesus shows grace anyway.

That's our outline.

### 1) The scribes don't believe. Read 14-15

So imagine that Jesus and the 3 disciples are coming down the mountain. Normally it would be pretty easy to see the valley below but the mountain has been wrapped in clouds to guard the people below from seeing Jesus's glory.

So everyone's down there, fog's on the mountain and out of nowhere Jesus and the 3 appear to the whole crowd. But there's squabbling going on. There's arguing. And it seems like the arguing is between the scribes and the other 9 disciples.

What are they arguing about? Well, we don't know for 100% but we can put some pieces together. The scribes have been notoriously hostile to Jesus and his disciples.

They chided him when he ate with tax collectors and sinners, they accused him of being possessed by Beelzabul after he cast out a demon, these were the guys who chided Jesus and the disciples for not washing their hands according to tradition. On and on. At every point the scribes have been resolutely against Jesus.

And they're bickering again. And the best we can tell they are probably trying to discredit Jesus and the apostles because the apostles can't cast out this demon from this little boy. **Read 18**

It seems that while Jesus and the 3 were on the mountain, this man brought the little boy to Jesus for an exorcism. Jesus was gone so the apostles decided to give it a go but they couldn't do it. They couldn't cast out the demon.

Well, that's embarrassing. Because they had cast out many demons before. Remember when they went on the tour around Israel preaching and casting out demons? Surely the scribes had heard about that. But now what? They've got no power.

Again, we don't know the exact content but based on past performance, their line of argument is probably: Jesus and his followers are all a sham! God has never really been on their side. They don't know where Jesus is, 3 apostles are missing and the ones who are left can do nothing.

The scribes are still stuck in their unbelief.

And I think that's why when the crowd sees Jesus and the 3 coming down they're amazed. They've been hearing this arguing for who knows how long. They're upset: they thought Jesus and the disciples could heal people but they can't. Here's this poor kid going through all this craziness and getting no relief. **Read 15**

So they're excited to see Jesus because maybe Jesus can do his thing.

So the scribes don't believe.

## 2) The disciples don't believe. Read 16-19

So Jesus gets the low down on what has happened in his absence. Now, I'm not going to rehash the whole "Isn't Jesus God so why does he ask questions" discussion. We've beat that horse good and dead. In his humanity some things are hidden from him. We don't know how that works.

But he gets the whole story. Now, at the risk of sounding like someone who has fallen into woke ideology, we have to say that the pronouns here are difficult to understand. **Read 16**

He asked them. Who is the "them?" The scribes, the disciples? The whole crowd? We don't know. It seems like it's probably the disciples. It makes sense that he would ask the disciples first, rather than the enemy about why they're arguing.

And before the disciples can answer the man from the crowd responds. He has the skin in the game. He's the one who brought his son. He's the one who heard about Jesus the exorcist and he wants this evil spirit to be done away with.

And the reason I say that the disciples don't believe is because in these few verses it seems as though the disciples have failed. The man brought his son to the disciples, and the disciples weren't able to do it.

And Jesus's response is "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you?" So the question is: who's being faithless? I think the answer is everybody in this is picture, except for Jesus, is being faithless. The whole generation is faithless. The scribes, the father. But I think here there is particular attention to the disciples.

They really are the ones at the center of this. The disciples didn't have the faith to cast this demon out. Or as we'll see later, the wherewithal to just pray for the child. And they even seem to indicate their own failings in the situation. **Read 28**

"What's the problem, Jesus?" Interestingly in the following stories the disciples continue to fail. They argue over who is the greatest. And get this: they want to rebuke other people for casting out demons. **Read 38-40**

That's kind of rich, you guys. They fail to cast out a demon and yet they want to rebuke someone else who actually is casting out demons. This is pretty thick irony.

So while Jesus seems to be frustrated with everybody, he seems to be especially frustrated here with the disciples' lack of faith as they are front and center.

Now, before we move on I think we need to spend a couple minutes talking about the craziness of this whole situation. The people of God in the ancient world were quick to realize when something had a demon element

to it. Because our world is so anti-supernatural we often relegate things to the natural world. They have a disease or a disorder or mental illness or whatever. Now, obviously there are medical conditions people can have. My only point is that we often completely overlook the fact that someone might have a spiritual condition.

Look at this poor kid. And remember that: this is a real, flesh-and-blood child who is suffering. This was this man's son whom he loved and who wanted spiritual help for.

- 1 - The man knows it's a spirit (**Vs. 17**).
- 2 - Makes him mute (**18**) and deaf (**25**).
- 3 - Foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. (**18**) What's that sound like? A seizure.
- 4 - Convulsing, rolling around. (**20**)
- 5 - Throws him into fire and water to try to kill him. Remember that demons - the Bible often refers to them simply as "spirits" - try to kill. That's what happened with the 2,000 pigs on the cliffs of the Lake of Galilee.
- 6 - This has been happening for a long time. We don't know how old the child is. He's referred to as a paidion - younger than 13.

This is a dire situation. The other thing this passage shows us is that apparently there are different levels of power that the spirit realm possesses. **Read 28-29**

The disciples had the power of exorcism. I've argued before that I believe exorcism is one of the main attributes of an apostle. **2 Cor. 12:12** says that the signs of a true apostle are signs, wonders and mighty works. When those terms are used in the gospels and Acts they usually refer to exorcism.

So we've got a spirit - a super powerful spirit - whom even the apostle can't cast out. Now, here's the deal. I think demonic spiritual activity goes on today. I'm sure I've seen at least 2 situations where there was demonic activity happening in a person.

What do we do then? How do we help? I don't have the gift of exorcism, and I'm guessing most of you don't either. If you do, maybe just tell me in private, we don't want it to get weird in here. But Jesus actually tells us what to do. **Read 29**

This kind. What kind? Probably this kind of spirit. This kind of spirit requires a solution that is not exorcism, per se. It's too much. It's too powerful. So what does it require? It requires prayer. Why does it require prayer? What is prayer? It's communication with God. But more than that, it is an utter reliance on God to take care of the situation. "God, please take this spirit away. Please cast this spirit out. You gotta do something!"

What it requires is faith. Trusting God to take care of the situation. It requires the very thing that's missing in this whole situation.

Listen, I don't know what crazy spiritual situations you have been in or might find yourself in in the future. But if you suspect demonic stuff going on, this is the passage for you. Pray.

Some of you have a footnote that says "Prayer and fasting." Fasting is going without food for some amount of time - usually a day - for the purpose of prayer. You pray at meal time rather than eat food. And the desire you have for food is a sign of the desire you have that God would answer your request. What it is is a sign that you are trusting God to provide what you need.

Here, even the apostles are told that there will be some spirits they encounter that will require simple faith in God to deal with the situation.

And that's something we can mimic.

Okay. So the scribes don't believe. The disciples don't believe.

3) Even the father doesn't believe. Not completely. **Read 20-23**

The father's last sentence betrays his lack of faith doesn't it? "If you can do anything."

What that shows is that he's not 100% sure that Jesus can actually help. And Jesus calls him out on that, doesn't he?

Now, to be fair, we can have some sympathy for this guy. He's at his end. His son has been battling this spirit for years, even the great disciples who are known for exorcism can't help. And until a few minutes ago Jesus was nowhere to be found and the boy is having an episode while they are speaking. He's really at the end here.

Actually, he's not quite at the end. Jesus doesn't let him off the hook. He says one of the most surprising things in all of his ministry to this man. **Read 23**

Ouch. I don't know about you but I would have thought Jesus would say "Of course I'll help him." "Bless you for your faith - go he is well." But Jesus doesn't let him get away with what has come out.

"If you can!?" What that shows is that the man has no idea who Jesus is. Functionally, the man believes that Jesus is no greater than the apostles who are unable to cast out the demon.

See the issue is not Jesus's ability. The issue is Jesus's willingness. And his willingness, at least here, seems to be tied to whether or not the person actually believes. Do they actually believe that he can do this?

If someone believes God all things are on the table. All things are possible. If you have faith in God it's basically a blank check for the possibilities.

Now, the caveat is that it has to be according to his will.

**James 1:8** says that we are to ask God - specifically for wisdom - but we have to ask in faith without doubting. If we doubt we're like a ocean wave that's tossed around by the wind - just splashing here and there. And James says if we doubt, don't suppose that we're going to get anything because we're double minded.

Let me ask you, have you ever been in a situation where you're praying to God asking for him to do something. And even while you're asking him for the thing you want, you're not sure he'll really do it? Maybe he could theoretically, or possibly. But you're asking God and you're already deciding that he can't or won't do it. And you know he knows your lack of faith? And you're just stuck. You're at the end, you have nothing left. God knows your sinful heart.

That's where this guy is. What do you do? You do what this guy does. **Read 24**

These are some of the most beautiful words in the gospel. Because this is us, isn't it? We believe, but our faith is weak. We want to honor God but we just can't do it on our own. Lord I believe, help my unbelief. This is a beautiful prayer request. Increase our faith.

See, I think this is where Jesus wanted this guy to get. A lot of times we think we're at our end. We think we can't go on, we think it can't get worse. This guy has been dealing with a situation for years, the disciples can't help, he's not sure Jesus can help. Jesus rebukes him for that notion and now he's in real trouble. He realizes Jesus can do this, and now the question is: has he blown this opportunity by offending the Lord of heaven and earth?

4) Jesus is gracious despite our unbelief. **Read 25-29**

Jesus gives the man what he wanted. In **Vs. 25** it seems as though he is off with some of the crowd and he notices the rest of the crowd coming. And as he often does, he performs the miracle in an inconspicuous way so that the whole crowd doesn't go crazy.

He casts out the spirit and it's gone. Never to enter him again. We don't know if the boy actually died or if he just appeared dead. He probably just appeared dead - usually the Bible isn't shy about a resurrection that takes place.

And then Jesus does what he often does after an amazing miracle: he goes to a private place so the crowds don't overwhelm him.

I don't know about you, but I find myself identifying a lot with the father in the story. I believe that God could do some amazing things. But do I really believe? Is my faith really what it should be?

The answer more often than not is "no." I struggle with unbelief. I need Jesus to help my unbelief. I can't conjure up more faith than what I have, I need God to come in a bolster what little faith I have.

And you know what? God does. God is merciful. God is gracious to us. For those who are in Christ, for believers, God is our loving and merciful Father who knows what we need even before we ask. He wants us to ask - that's part of the deal. But he stands ready to give.

All things are possible from our good and gracious Father.

**Pray**