

NCBC Youth Group
February 9, 2020 | Communion Sunday

THE FIRST LESSON ON FAITH
MARK 9:14-29

Introduction

The Bible tells us that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). The disciples, for two years, mostly walked by sight. They heard, they saw, and they touched Jesus (1 Jn. 1:1). Yes, they had some faith, because unlike most of the unbelieving crowd—who thought Jesus was a prophet or some great man—the disciples actually believed that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But they still walked mostly by sight, and all that will change as Jesus makes His way to the cross.

The cross is less than a year away. It was time for His disciples to learn some critical lesson to prepare them for His departure. He will still be with them, but He will no longer be present physically. They will have to live by faith and no longer by sight. Our passage today is a lesson on faith.

The Commotion

In the previous passage, Jesus transfigured on a high mountain with three disciples—Peter, James, and John—showing them His glory. Where were the other nine disciples? Verse 14 answers that: They were down there having an argument with the scribes. We’re not told what the argument was about, but it was likely that they argued about their failure to cast out a demon. In verses 17-18, we read about a father who brought his demon-possessed son to the nine disciples, asking them to cast out the demon. However, the disciples failed and could not cast out the demon (18b).

So, Jesus comes down the mountain to find a large crowd around the disciples while they were arguing with the scribes. This is a good illustration of faith and a good example of what is to come. In this incident, Jesus was not physically present with them, and that will become the norm very soon. They must live by faith without the physical presence of Jesus.

Verse 15 tells us that when the crowd saw Jesus, “they were amazed and began running up to greet Him.” Seeing their argument, Jesus asked in verse 16, “What are you discussing with them?” Answer? Silence. The scribes nor the disciples responded. Again, we’re not told why, but perhaps the scribes didn’t want to debate Jesus and the disciples didn’t want to speak up amidst failure.

As they kept silent, someone in the crowd comes up to Jesus, falls on his knees before Jesus,¹ and shouted² in verses 17-18, “Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; [18] and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.”

Here is a father who is desperate for help. His son was severely afflicted, and this was his only child (9:38). His son was demon-possessed, and the demon caused him much violence. If you look at verse 22, we see that the demon has tried to kill his son: “It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him.” It also slams him to the ground, verses 18 and 20.

Some conjecture that this person has brain damage due to being slammed around in these physically traumatic movements. Look at his symptoms: Verse 18 says he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens out. Verse 20 and 26 add that he has terrible convulsions and rolls around on the ground. These symptoms sound like epilepsy caused by the repeated traumatic brain injuries. Indeed, Matthew’s summary of this condition is very fitting: “He is a lunatic and is very ill” (17:15). The word “lunatic” in Greek can be translated as “epileptic,”³ and he was certainly very ill.

The father wanted relief for his son, but the disciples could not cast out the demon and granted him no relief. So, when Jesus showed up, the father came to Him.

Jesus Casts out the Demon

Verse 19, “And He [Jesus] answered them and said, ‘O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!’” You can hear the frustration in Jesus. His disciples had been with him for over two years, and they still displayed weak faith, lack of understanding, and lack of trust in Him. By the way, when Jesus referred to “unbelieving generation,”⁴ He is indicating that unbelief was the cause of their inability to cast out the demon.

¹ Matt. 17:14

² Luke 9:38

³ The Greek word is *seleniazomai*, where “selene” means moon. The word actually means “moonstruck.” Lunatic is an English word that comes from Latin. “Luna” is the Latin word for “moon,” and Luna was the name of the Roman moon goddess. The word is used because the Greeks thought epilepsy was influenced by the moon (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words, G4583, *seleniazō*), e.g., when the moon increased, epilepsy increased. However, it is doubtful that the Greeks knew much about epilepsy.

⁴ Unbelieving generation is directed toward the disciples.

When they brought the boy to Jesus, verse 20, the demon “threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth.” All while this is happening, Jesus asked the father in verse 21 how long this has been happening to him.⁵ And we find out that this has been happening since childhood (21).

The father then says in verse 22, “But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!” The father shows us his doubts when he said, “if You can do anything.” The father doesn’t doubt Jesus’ willingness. He knew Jesus was willing to do it, but he was doubting Jesus’ ability and power. Now, obviously the father believed that Jesus could do something like this, otherwise why did he even bother coming to Jesus?

Jesus responds in verse 23, “If you can?” All things are possible to him who believes.” By the way, we are not talking about everything is possible if you just believe. Everything is possible if it is according to the will of God and to the glory of God. The father answered, “I do believe, help my unbelief.” He had some faith, but he also had doubt. He is like everyone of us who are Christians. We always have imperfect faith: faith mixed with doubt.

In verses 25-26, Jesus casts out the demon. Jesus did so as the crowd was “rapidly gathering.” The time is over for Him to demonstrate His power. He wasn’t here to just entertain people, so He performs this miracle before the crowd had fully gathered. While He was casting out the demon, the demon gave one last final violent protest, throwing him into a terrible convulsion. The boy was probably very exhausted that verse 26 says he was like a corpse and people said, “He is dead!” Verse 27 is another picture of the compassion and tenderness of Jesus: “Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.”

The Lesson

We move from a public setting to a private setting. In verse 28, they ask Jesus privately, “Why could we not drive it out?” We’re going to spend some time on verse 29, because this is the lesson at hand, and it is a lesson on faith.

Jesus answered in verse 29, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer.” Matthew gives us more detail. Go to Matthew 17:20: “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this

⁵ Jesus knew how long; He is sovereign. He is not asking to get information He wasn’t aware of. This was an act of compassion. He wanted the father to tell the painful experience and to share that experience with Jesus. And this was certainly a painful story to tell because this has been happening to the boy from childhood, and verse 22 says the demon had tried to kill the boy. It was a painful thing for this parent to see.

mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

Confidence

Now, let's diagnose the problem with the disciples. Why could they not drive out the demon? Was it a lack of confidence? You know, you hear people say, "Believe in yourself" or "have faith in yourself." Did they need more confidence and believe in themselves more? No, they had plenty of confidence. They tried to cast out the demon, thinking they could do it. Actually, it probably caught them by surprise that the demon didn't come out, and that's why they asked Jesus in verse 28 why they couldn't do it. They could have just said, "Wait awhile, Jesus is coming, and He will cast out the demon." Instead, they had plenty of confidence in themselves and attempted to cast out the demon. After all, they did it before in Mark 6 when Jesus sent them out in pairs and they cast out many demons.

So, what's the problem? They were confident, but the object of their confidence was misplaced. They were confident in themselves. Their faith was deficient. They should have placed their confidence in God and not in themselves. Let this be a lesson to all of us: We depend on God, and we don't place confidence in ourselves.

Faith

Let's talk about Matthew 17:20 for a moment. Their faith was little and that's why they couldn't cast out the demon. What is faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is our belief in God when we have no resources. When you have nothing, do you believe God will provide as He promised?

Think about this. Here is little faith: I have faith that God will provide food for my family. I go to my freezer and refrigerator and take out some food to eat. But what if something happened and we run out of food or have no money to buy food? That's very different than having faith in God when you have something within reach, isn't it?

I think this is a good illustration of little faith. Little faith is faith in God when you have something within reach. I trust God to provide when my pantry is well-stocked. Some people might be saying, how is that little faith, shouldn't that be no faith? No, because I still trust that the money I use to buy food comes from God, and we thank Him for that. Likewise, the disciples had little faith because Jesus was physically present with them. But their faith needs to increase because Jesus will soon depart.

Prayer

Why did Jesus say, “This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer (9:29). In prayer, we align our will with God’s will. We ask according to God’s will. I John 5:14 says, “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” Going back to Mark 9:23, we read, “All things are possible to him who believes.” It is only possible if it is according to His will.⁶

In prayer we also demonstrate our dependence and reliance on God. We pray to Him because we recognize our inability to do anything. We trust in Him and in His power. In other words, in prayer, we depend on God and rely on God. The object of our faith and confidence is God, not ourselves. We don’t depend and rely on ourselves.⁷

Mustard Seed

Well, how much faith do we need? Jesus, in Matthew 17:20, says that small faith the size of a mustard seed can accomplish great things. The problem with the disciples was not that they needed great faith. Small faith was enough to accomplish great things, but that faith needed to be placed in the right object: God. It must be faith in God. When people say, “Trust yourself, have faith in yourself,” I think, if that’s all I have, then I’m in trouble.

And like the small mustard seed, which grows into a mustard tree, our faith also needs to grow. It starts small but grows. The disciples had small faith, but their faith will grow. New believers often get what they ask for. They pray and God responds. However, as time goes on and we mature in our faith, it seems like sometimes it takes a long time before God answers our prayers. Why? Because waiting on God to answer drives us to our knees as we persist in prayer. We ask and ask and continue asking until He answers. Persistence in prayer and waiting on God to answer is God strengthening our faith.

Before we wrap up, I’m not at all endorsing modern faith-healers. The people that are on TV who claim they can heal people. Those people are phony. They often say, you’re not healed because you don’t have enough faith. That’s just an excuse for their inability to heal, because they have no power to heal. This passage is definitely not authorizing us to run around being faith healers.

Conclusion

⁶ That phrase is misused so many times, along with Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

⁷ As a word of caution, we don’t pray to God carelessly. We don’t just come to Him and say, “God give me this or give me that.” The Puritans used to say we must sue God in prayer. Listen, if you have to give reasons as to why you want something, you examine your motive for asking it. You examine whether you are asking in alignment with God’s will.

As we end, let me give you a few stories of faith. Caleb was a Jewish spy sent to the land of Canaan. Canaan was a formidable land with giants, fortified cities, and strong people (Num. 13:28). On a human level, the Israelites could not conquer that land—it was too strong for them. But Caleb said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it” (Num. 13:30). That’s faith. He had faith that God had the power; he didn’t trust in him or their men.

Hebrews 11:32-34 says, “For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, [13] who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, [34] quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” This is all faith in the power of God to conquer and to deliver.

We, like the disciples, will always have imperfect faith. We will always have our faith mixed with doubt, but let us always make God the object of our faith, trusting in Him and not in ourselves.